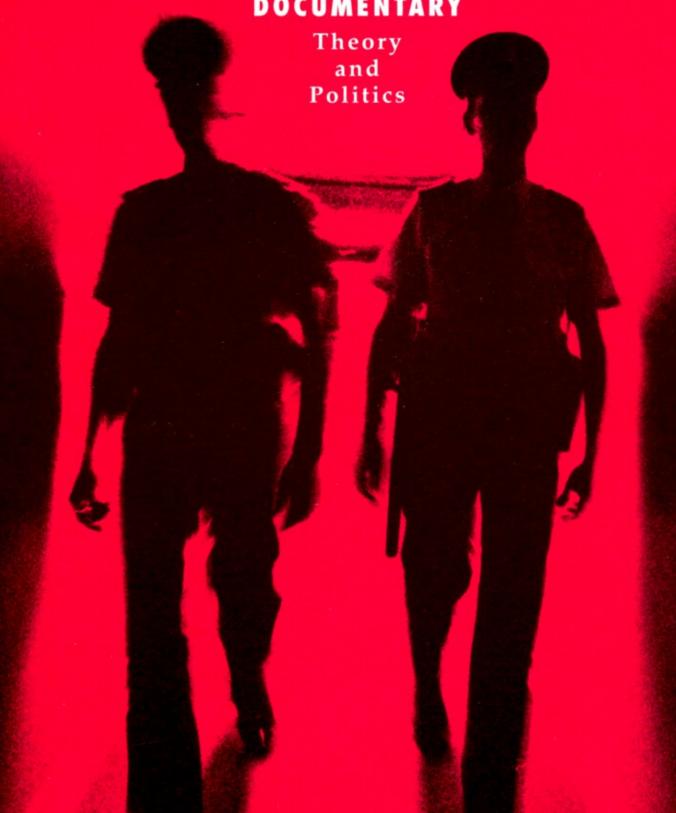


cineaction

DOCUMENTARY



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cineaction

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S

- 4 A CINEMA OF DUTY
 The Films of Jennifer Hodge De Silva
 by Cameron Bailey
- 14 EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE AND THE POLITICS OF POWER by Bill Nichols
- 22 PROUDLY SHE MARCHES
 Wartime Propaganda and the Lesbian Spectator
 by Marilyn Burgess
- 28 WORDS OF COMMAND
 Notes on Cultural and Political Inflections of
 Direct Cinema in Indian Independent Documentary
 by Tom Waugh
- 40 THE BOURGEOISIE IS NOT MY AUDIENCE An Interview with John Greyson by Peter Steven
- 46 WINDOWS WITHOUT GLASS
 Reflections on the Documentary Genre

RADICAL FILM CRITICISM AND THEORY

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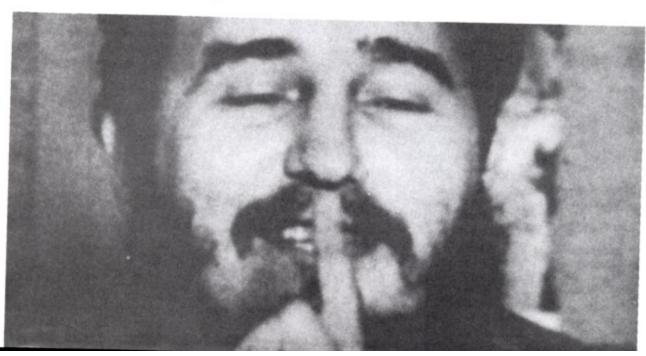
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4	A CINEMA OF DUTY		
	The Films of Jennifer Hodge	De	Silva
	by Cameron Bailey		

- 14 EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE AND THE POLITICS OF POWER by Bill Nichols
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 by Tom Waugh
- 40 THE BOURGEOISIE IS NOT MY AUDIENCE An Interview with John Greyson by Peter Steven
- 46 WINDOWS WITHOUT GLASS
 Reflections on the Documentary Genre
 by Ron Burnett
- 54 DOCUMENTARY AND FIGURATION by John McCullough
- 60 RADICALISM AND POPULAR CINEMA The Films of Oliver Stone by Robin Wood
- 70 FESTIVAL OF FESTIVALS COVERAGE
 The Burning Times
 The Company of Strangers
 Bethune: The Making of A Hero
 Reversal of Fortune
 Weininger's Nacht



Documentary

THEORY, POLITICS AND ... WATCHING THE GULF WAR

Rumours of the death of documentary film are apparently exaggerated. The discussion and analysis in this issue cover provocative political and theoretical issues in documentaries all over the world — issues of imperialism, race, class, sexuality, gender ... and, repeatedly, the nature of documentary itself. They respond both to documentary's history and to fertile contemporary development and elaboration. Despite our casual assumption of what films are being categorized, or stolid memories of boring educational films, documentary designates a volatile and sometimes vexed form.

Canadians inevitably think of Grierson's nomination of Flaherty as originator (and Nanook as document). That casts us forward to a long lineage of Anglo-American state and corporate production, a particular way of asserting authority and sentiment over social conflict and Others, a consistent claim to control realism and reality. Recent analysis has begun to delineate the generic conventions and and politics at work in these claims. But we also think of Brecht who used documentary as one of the ways to define the aesthetic of the revolutionary theatre he and Piscator were developing. From this angle of etymology, we should recall the important ways documentary, across art forms, has related to socialist commitment and social movements, the venerable formal and political resistance to "official" representations of reality. If documentary's first claims are to realism, it is worth recalling that the insistence on the relationship to reality can also be traced in the modernist conventions of the oppositional avant-garde.

The collection and editing of these articles was punctuated and interrupted by the horrors of the Gulf War. The iron heels of the New World Order battered the peoples of Iraq — real horror, which we watched, sanitized, as triumphal spectacle on magazine covers and TV screens. But the obscene celebration was also thoroughly documentary; the Western media were a collective Leni Reifenstahl for Bush's Desert Slaughter. All of the formal and political dilemmas analyzed in these pages were played out in the media's Nurembergian construction of the "heroic" oil war.

The uncertainty of the opposition between the fictional and the factual is much discussed in several articles here. It is a tension throughout documentary's history and a manifest theme in much recent practice. But the dominant media are also happy to elide any such careful borders. In the Gulf spectacle, this was taken to the most literal extreme of fabrication and lies; stolen baby incubators, massive Iraqi buildups, nuclear and chemical bombs, murdered seabirds, thousands tortured in Kuwait, surgical strikes and smart bombs... heh, heh, just kidding, that's military intelligence for you! What's significant is not the immorality of the leaders of the West — hardly news — but the irrelevance of any historical or political fact — except as the infotainment fog of the Experts — to the authoritarian narrative propulsion the media constructed. Official documentary's pompous epistemology often obscures its thrust to resolve and conclude its stories of fractious reality; here, both imperialist policy and media ratings feared that there might be a diplomatic route, that we wouldn't have the orgasmic finale.

Fiction was also present in the incorporation and play with genres across the monthslong blockbuster. The multipling genres signalled the incoherence of the shifting stories and principles supposedly at issue, but also the confidence that the class interests served and aestheticized would tell all the stories. Often we watched turgid talk shows, with only retired generals as guests. (It took a while to realize the Vietnam war they were so glad to finally be re-fighting "without one arm tied behind their backs" was Rambo's, not the real one.) Game show hosts scrambled excitedly over giant studio battlefield maps. The Super Bowl was clearly the inspiration for much commentary style and content. Mock verité took us to a strictly controlled front for poignant vignettes of "our" boys and, ersatz feminism served, girls. They all looked and talked just like Tom Cruise,

too. For all the media's celebrated hi-tech modernity, these were images out of WWI and II propaganda. A Toronto tabloid helpfully headlined the arrival of the "land" war as HIGH NOON. Of course, coding the Western and the warrior ethos into the war may prove difficult; the grisly "shooting in the back" of a surrendered and retreating enemy, the central strategy of terror-bombing civilians — surely, Hollywood won't forget all those burned innocents?

Melodrama, within the war movie, may work out more serviceably. We enjoyed many tearful moments on the home front awaiting news of relatives. More crucially, we went inside Israeli homes to await, gas masks on, the arrival of "terrorist" Scuds, TV's favoured visual image throughout. Israel has always been a strategic linchpin of imperialism, here the family anxiety of people "just like us" transmitted the racist polarization so much prowar sentiment rested on. "We" — the West, the media — could not see the millions of Palestinians, without gas masks, under deadly curfew, only miles away; their invisibility justified "our" indifference. (Simultaneously, for hundreds of millions in the world, it was this contradiction which most exposed the audacious hypocrisy of the West: the invasions, occupations and atrocities of the Zionist state are regrettable necessities - send another \$10 billion). The horror film also filtered into the presentation of the war, not least in the shuddering frisson of images and deaths we couldn't be shown, which had to be offscreen. More explicitly, the racist demonization of Arabs and, particularly, Saddam Hussein, played on fears of the Other deep in the West's Christian and imperial emotions. But did you notice that Bush looked increasingly like Freddy Kruger ghoulishly MCing throughout his bloodthirsty show?

Fans of self-reflexivity were able to enjoy a great deal of self-analysis by the media. The craven toadying to imperial policy was so transparent, a few liberals, hauling the creaky ideology of objectivity, discovered "bias" or bemoaned that war was being made to look like Nintendo. This trivial inoculation provided a little distance for those who were politically complicit but embarrassed by the spectacle's World Wrestling Federation aesthetic. When Walter Cronkite urged his fellows to the "high standards" of WWII reporters, we consciously entered the genre of parody.

The war marches on in homecoming parades and highlight videos, cards and dolls, variety shows and new *Top Guns*; the mood is both bullying and complacent. For all the "good" dictators — who again include the demon Hussein — and the impoverished and exploited, it's Business as Usual. If the size and rapid organization of the anti-war movement all over the world are reasons for hope, the media's total marginalization of opposition doubtless demoralized many. But that should mean that opposition proceeds at many levels, including contesting that dominant media, and stretching the limits of committed practice. From a variety of theoretical and national perspectives, the critics assembled contribute to that difficult process.

This issue marks several significant changes to this magazine. Designer Bob Wilcox has developed a new look for CineAction and we welcome him. We would like to thank Mary Jankulak, Stuart Ross and Kevin Connolly and Excalibur Productions for years of hard work and patience in designing, typesetting and producing with us. As well, with a reduced collective and rising expenses, we will be moving to a three issue per year format. We apologize for the lateness of this issue; we hope the new publishing schedule will prove more realistic.

Kass Banning Scott Forsyth

A Cinema of Duty

THE FILMS OF JENNIFER HODGE DE SILVA

by Cameron Bailey



Whether or not future histories of black filmmaking in Canada begin with Jennifer Hodge de Silva, they will have to acknowledge her importance. Best known today for her 1983 documentary Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community, Hodge de Silva directed a number of films during the 1980s that established the dominant mode in African Canadian film culture. Working exclusively in the documentary and often on sponsored films, she staked out a set of concerns and a mode of production that might be termed black liberalism. Home Feeling explored relations between police and black immigrant communities in Toronto's Jane-Finch neighborhood, but most of Hodge de Silva's films did not deal with specifically black subjects. Instead her work (and it is only since she died in 1989 that so heterogenous a group of films has assumed the shape of a body of work), dealt with a wide range of social concerns, from anti-racist education in Myself, Yourself to selfhelp programs for ex-convicts in In Support of the Human Spirit. Hodge de Silva's films represent a black humanist agenda, and more specifically a black Canadian humanist agenda. Many of her sponsored films, like A Day in the Life of Canada, (The Yukon), Neighborhoods - Outremont and

Neighborhoods - Kensington Market are precisely about Canadian cultural geography. Running through both these films and the "issue" films is this humanist agenda, this socially reconstructive program. Hodge de Silva's work does address the real nature of racism facing black people in Canada, but there's more succor than anger in her films. While Home Feeling and Myself. Yourself are critical of some elements of Canadian society, their critique is couched entirely in terms of reform rather than revolu-

But does this devalue Hodge de Silva's work? By most standards of committed black filmmaking, yes. "Blackness does not mean that we are inherently oppositional," cultural critic bell hooks reminds us. "Our creative work is shaped by a

market that reflects white supremacist values and concerns" (18). However, while Hodge de Silva's films should never be misconstrued as the first alarm of a black revolution in Canadian film culture, they do occupy an important position at the beginning of a new movement. Their very status as the product of a complex set of (for the most part) institutionally defined circumstances, circumstances that continue to govern black filmmaking in Canada, makes them worthy of study. It

is no accident that the vast majority of films produced by African Canadians have been firmly within the social issue, documentary realist genre, and Hodge de Silva's work is exemplary in that regard. In addition, without marginalizing this work outside of aesthetics, it is important that "common" notions in film criticism about the category of the "interesting" not be the first method of approach in dealing with Hodge de Silva's work. Operating entirely outside art-cinema's positive criteria of innovation and experimentation, these films' documentary realist practice seeks neither to shock nor seriously challenge the viewer, but to reconfirm certain norms of liberal conscience and national identity. In examining something of Hodge de Silva's history and later the films themselves, I hope to articulate a way of watching her films, primarily for black viewers, that engages with them on levels both within and without their own frames of reference, but never in ignorance of what those frames of reference are, or why they exist. I hope this study will serve as a beginning in rescuing Hodge de Silva from the critical neglect (Who is she?) and critical squeamishness (wouldn't analyzing such simple films be unfair?) under which her pioneering

work has languished.

The first frame that needs to be outlined is Hodge de Silva herself. Product of a unique set of personal circumstances, she emerged from and into very particular and very divergent moments Canadian history. Born and raised in Montreal, Hodge de Silva grew up in a class - the black Canadian urban bourgeoisie - with barely enough members to qualify as such at the time. Her mother is an accomplished figure

who for years sat on the board of directors of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Hodge de Silva's publicity bio boasts that, as a young woman, she attended school in Switzerland. She completed her education with a bachelor's degree from York University in 1973 and a TV Arts diploma from Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in 1979.

All of this is significant only to the extent that it establishes something of the complex and ambiguous positions from which Hodge de Silva made her films. She possessed both the class entitlement and cultural capital that her parents and education gave her, but she was also a black woman breaking into a film industry that had never been anxious to acknowledge either women or people of colour as anything but vic-



Left and above: Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community

Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community





tims. She came to Toronto in the period when the relaxing of Canada's racist immigration laws began to permit thousands of black West Indian immigrants to settle in the city's suburbs. Many of them wound up in the Jane-Finch neighborhood, just blocks from where Hodge de Silva studied Fine Arts at York University, and where she would eventually make *Home Feeling*. That rise of sudden black communities around her, with histories very different from hers, produces another frame of dissonance for Hodge de Silva. So too her mother's status at the CBC and Hodge de Silva's later work at that network and the National Film Board suggest a willingness to work inside Canada's two major image-producing institutions — accepting the limits of their liberal ideologies — even as they attempt to use the power of the institution to further a discussion of pressing political issues.

Above all, there is the simultaneous contradiction of class privilege and political solidarity that *Home Feeling* and *Myself Yourself* try so hard to resolve. As a Canadian-born, middle-class filmmaker with roots within media institutions, Hodge de Silva could not help but come at the "issues" her films treat so seriously — police racism, educational racism, prison rights, Native culture — from the outside. In fact, it is the variety of the subjects she treats, as well as how she treats them, that marks her work as textbook liberal documentary practice. It has historically been the privilege of (white) middle-class filmmakers to create the issue films that speak so forcefully for the all world's oppressed, and therefore define the very nature of oppression.

To better understand this history and Hodge de Silva's place in it one need look no further than one of the director's mentors, NFB veteran Terence Macartney-Filgate. A pioneer of the "Candid-Eye" cinema verité movement in Canada (he made the classic *Back Breaking Leaf* in 1959), Macartney-Filgate went on to direct in 1978 one of the first substantive films about black history in Canada, *Fields of Endless Day*. Hodge de Silva landed a job working with Macartney-Filgate as an apprentice on the project. An interview with Macartney-Filgate published just prior to *Fields of Endless Day* is instructive for the perspective from which he views his subjects. Claiming a remarkably degree of disinterest, he rejects any hint of political intent in his socially progressive body of films. About *Back Breaking Leaf*, which revealed punishing labour conditions in the tobacco industry, he says:

Actually I loathe rural areas and farms [but] the people interested me... People are the reason I make films, because I don't like to make films particularly about things, or work on idea films...

I have political views but they would never influence anything I did in film. This is something I think any artist has to keep apart. (82-83)

These were not uncommon views among a certain generation of NFB staff directors. It is without doubt an approach to documentary filmmaking to which Hodge de Silva was exposed at the Board and probably at the CBC as well, an approach which downplayed politics and ideas, even in social-issue films, in favour of the emotional currency of "people".

There are a number of broad cultural and economic rea-

sons for Hodge de Silva's move into social issue, documentary realist cinema that deserve closer scrutiny. Remembering bell hooks' notion that black cultural production is shaped by a market that reflects white supremacist values and concerns, the deep structure of Canadian media culture's regimes of control becomes clearer. Hodge de Silva was not merely attracted to the CBC and the NFB because of her mother's involvement; these institutions (after short or long periods of knocking) actually opened their doors to her.

As reflections of state policy, institutions such as the NFB and the CBC have long been concerned with the nation's social well-being. Long before the capital-L Liberalism of Pearson and Trudeau, though certainly on the increase during that era, these two media institutions constructed their mandates to include the maintenance of national bonds. Acknowledging the varied ethnic make-up of the country, and more importantly controlling any social eruptions that might occur from that variety, have long been a part of the everyday work of the CBC and NFB. Broadcasting and filmmaking were designed as social cement. Given this, and the additional impetus provided by the introduction of multiculturalism as official federal policy in 1971, it made sense that black voices be encouraged within Canada's official media. But how?

It should be obvious that the size, resources and omnipresence of the CBC and NFB within image-culture in Canada results in a breathtaking ability to control even that which takes place outside their gates. It is this element of control which is foregrounded in the interaction between these institutions and black Canadian filmmakers. Take a typical case of a first-time black filmmaker seeking to make a film about some aspect of her community. She is much more likely to receive funding from the Film Board or the federal or provincial office overseeing multiculturalism or some other wing of state social engineering than from the "artist-driven" funding of the arts councils, which have historically considered documentary films as not art, and all black films as more or less documentary. That funding in turn determines what the resulting film will look and sound like, and, to some degree, what it will say. It is this management of dissent, this ability to channel black voices of protest or affirmation through its corridors that has been the real race-relations success of the National Film Board.

There are of course many other factors governing the firm links that have been made between black filmmaking in Canada and institutions such as the NFB and the CBC. It is important to remember that historically all Canadian filmmaking has to one degree or another been funded by staterun agencies. It must also be acknowledged that everywhere African people have picked up movie cameras, the impulse to tell the untold "true" stories, stories that have been suppressed or misconstrued by others, has been one of the first priorities.

There is also the question of the closed doors of the avantgarde. The network of art school and university film education, film co-ops, alternative exhibition venues and art magazines that has supported Canada's independent and experimental film movements since the 1960s has been a notoriously sealed circuit. An accusation of racism would no doubt be Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community



abhorrent to these small institutions, but the visible and persistent whiteness of the shifting power elites within these groups says all that one needs to. The white "avant-garde" has long operated under a set of assumptions that excludes most political filmmaking, and certainly most politically engaged filmmaking by black filmmakers. As Tom Waugh notes in a discussion of the committed documentary, the criteria of bourgeois aesthetics - "durability, abstraction, ambiguity, individualism, uniqueness, formal complexity, deconstructed or redistributed signifiers, novelty and so on" generally do not apply to documentaries designed to motivate social change. "How then," he asks, "do we talk about films whose aesthetics consist in political use-value?" (xxii) Pose that question to the keepers of the avant-garde and the answer surely is "We don't." Still, one must continue to ask, how can a movement that claims to challenge accepted perceptions of the world and of art proceed without acknowledging that those accepted perceptions are and have long been bound to sexist and racist ideologies as well? How has the avant-garde been able to continue this long without challenging the race and gender constructs of the image system it rejects and still call itself an avant-garde?

One of the unnoticed aspects of the emergence of black filmmakers in Canada during the 1980s was their work in sponsored filmmaking. These documentaries, usually made for public-service organizations or government branches, not only provided experience and decent remuneration to the filmmakers, but worked in a kind of shadow-economy to the output of the Film Board. Hodge de Silva made Home Feeling (and a little-known film on potato farming in Prince Edward Island) for the NFB, Myself, Yourself for the Toronto Board of Education, and In Support of the Human Spirit for the John Howard Society. Fellow black film pioneer Claire Prieto has also made sponsored films. While Hodge de Silva's films vary widely in subject, style and conditions of production, they do each come with an agenda, a clear, often explicit perspective on the people and events depicted that it wants to transmit to the viewer. It is this propaganda-for-social-change method that allows her to switch easily from "independent" statefunded filmmaking to sponsored filmmaking. It is also this method that she inherits from John Grierson.

Critic William Guynn notes that "if there is one feature that characterizes documentary as institution, it is a basic dependency... it stands outside the circuit of finance, production and consumption that defines cinema as institution" (221-22). Documentary's system of exchange, he suggests, is based not on money-for-pleasure, as with commerical cinema, but rather on time-for-education, or uplift. There is actually an economy of displeasure, or unpleasure, at work in the contract negotiated between the documentary film and its viewer. To Canadian audiences this will seem a familiar dichotomy. It is Grierson's "moods of resolution" versus Hollywood's moods of relaxation.

In his classic manifesto "A Film Policy for Canada," (written in 1944 after his policy had already been implemented, as a way of *explaining* it to the nation), Grierson articulated his plan to redesign the Canadian film industry as "a public utility" (57). Written in the breathless prose characteristic of his wartime propaganda films (one wouldn't remark if he

exclaimed "Quotas have been exceeded in every sector!"), Grierson outlines his now infamous conclusion that, given Hollywood's expertise at feature filmmaking, Canada should "specialize" in nation-building documentaries:

In Canada today we may not make many feature story films, but every year we make hundreds of short films which describe the life of the nation... They progressively cover the whole field of civic interest: what Canadians need to know and think about if they are going to do their best by Canada and by themselves.

And as always Grierson was frighteningly prescient in determining exactly what Canadians needed to know and think about:

There are films, too, of Canadian achievements in painting and craftsmanship, of Canadian folk songs, of the contributions of the various race groups to Canadian culture. The instrument by which this plan is being executed is called the National Film Board. 64-65.

Already the bland, levelling sweep of multiculturalism was in place, as an *effect* of the NFB. As Joyce Nelson notes in her critique of the Grierson myth, part of the Film Board's wartime nation building (i.e. propaganda) concentrated on defusing ethnic and regional differences in Canada. This was accomplished not by ignoring them, but by surveying them benignly, in films like *Peoples of Canada*, from the flattening perspective of the white Anglo-Canadian. Difference was acknowledged at a surface level, only to submit eventually to the higher authority of nation, particularly the white, Angloruled nation. This practice, of course, had its legacy in Multiculturalism.

Through the 1960s and 70s individual filmmakers at the NFB may have progressed beyond Grierson's vision of the Board as a cog (or perhaps a driveshaft) in the social machine, but the energy of the organization itself remained, and I believe remains today constant. When Hodge de Silva entered in the 70s, it still functioned, though in a less direct fashion, as an instrument of state policy. It is this pedagogical imperative which turns up as Hodge de Silva's propaganda-for-social-change, a style which, given its origins in Grierson's policies, can serve independent documentary or sponsored film equally well.

So do Hodge de Silva's films participate in solicitng Grierson's "moods of resolution"? Absolutely. But does that make them as totalitarian as Grierson's methods often were? No. A distinction, however fine, must be made between resolve in the service of consolidating national unity and resolve in the service of dismantling, or even questioning, an oppressive status quo that may in fact stem from the construction of "national unity." This may be allowing Hodge de Silva's films more than they intend, but it seems clear they cannot be fit easily within what Grierson meant by nation-building.

Kobena Mercer's theorizing around the limits of documen-



Fields of Endless Day

tary realism is useful in shedding more light on Hodge de Silva's work. Mercer categorizes the documentary realist aesthetic as following four filmic values: "transparency, immediacy, authority, and authenticity" (9). When articulated from a black perspective, a film made with these values is meant to "correct" racist and stereotypical images. "It renders present that which is absent in the dominant discourse." However, the "race-relations narrative," a system that can be engaged by either documentary or dramatic realist filmmakers, is ultimately a dead end:

Within the logic of its narrative patterns, blacks tend to be depicted either as the source and cause of social problems — threatening to disrupt the social equilibrium — or as the passive bearers of social problems — victimised into angst-ridden submission or dependency. In either case, such stories encode versions of reality that confirm the ideological precept that "race" constitutes a "problem" per se. 8-9

This is a trap into which Hodge de Silva's "race" films fall quite cleanly, though the story doesn't end there. By nature of her training and institutional base, her films about people of colour were in a way bound to be race-relations efforts. Brian Winston, outlining what he calls "the victim tradition" in documentary practice, finds its roots in a combination of Robert Flaherty's romantic style and privileging of the individual and Grierson's "social concern and propaganda" (272). But Hodge de Silva's films display a kind of frisson in this area, an oscillation between the hierarchy of filmmaker over subject of the victim-model, and a movement towards the subject, a movement actually towards identification that pushes it beyond that pattern. Particularly in *Home Feeling* there is the beginning of a new black subjectivity that surpasses the race relations notion of black as source or victim of problems. True, the problems are most definitely there, but the trajectory of the film is not *only* one of victimhood and problem-creation.

That surplus effect in *Home Feeling* may stem from what Julia Lesage, one of documentary realism's defenders, points out are the different ways in which the form can be used by members of a marginalized group:

Realist feminist documentaries represent a use of,

yet a shift in, the aesthetics of cinema verité, due to the feminist filmmakers' close identification with their subjects, participation in the women's movement, and sense of the films' intended effect. 246

It may be this tentative identification with its subjects, which, given the conditions of production for the film and Hodge de Silva's own very different history, must not be an easy one, that gives the film its power. Lesage later notes that:

If many feminist filmmakers have deliberately used a traditional "realist" documentary structure, it is because they see making these films as an urgent public act and wish to enter the 16mm circuit of educational films, especially through libraries, schools, churches, unions and YWCAs, to bring a feminist analysis to many women it might otherwise never reach. 225

Tom Waugh also stresses the importance of audience to the success and indeed the construction of the "committed documentary", even defining that term as "films made by activists speaking to specific publics to bring about specific political goals" (xiii). If Hodge de Silva is indeed speaking to specific publics to attain specific political goals in *Home Feeling*, *Myself Yourself* and other films, then there is some further potential for the films. Those publics, constituted at their broadest as people of colour living in Canada, subjects constructed within racism, stand outside of false, power-effacing notions of a "general audience" under which the NFB is usually compelled to operate.

However, it is important to remember that in noting the importance of the realist style in black Canadian filmmaking, and even in rehabilitating a corner of it as acceptable under certain conditions, we cannot limit ourselves to a version of Lesage's strategic realism. That implies a choice, something that, given all that's been outlined above, black filmmakers have generally not had. The institutions within which Hodge de Silva and others made films brooked no other style but realist. These filmmakers were not schooled in various styles of avant-garde or hybrid documentary, never having been welcome in the art schools or critical journals where it was taken for granted. So by the time they were making films they were able to rationalize the "frivolity" of such methods for dealing with black subjects, because - to return to Lesage political urgency meant realism, but not as a choice, as an almost transparent fact of life.

But if the choice of realism was transparent, how seethrough is the method itself as Hodge de Silva practiced it? On the surface, Myself, Yourself, Home Feeling and In Support of the Human Spirit articulate an explicitly liberal agenda where the just and the injust are clearly drawn categories, and empathy and understanding hold the power to solve most problems. Formally, the films appear seamlessly constructed, hard to look behind. Though Hodge de Silva's "personality" can be found in what she chose to make films about, the films themselves resist the search for a subjective voice, a personal point of view. Of course, given the institutional origins of most of her work, notions of authorship must take a different tack. Hodge de Silva never worked in an independent film milieu that permitted (or required) reconstructing one's psyche as the point of articulation within the film text. This apparent absence of a psychological centre reinforces the films' transparency.

However, Hodge de Silva interpreted the grammar of documentary realism and the limits of sponsored films in a way that I would argue is distinct, even personal. Her films' mode of address is in fact not transparent, though what makes them particular to her is often so subtle, so slight, that one is impressed more by the implications than the direct effect. For example, both Joe David: Spirit of the Mask and In Support of the Human Spirit include establishing shots of Canadian city streets (Vancouver and Toronto) that are immediately remarkable (at least to me) for their racial mix. Black, brown, and yellow faces are prominent in Hodge de Silva's "random" street shots - not absent and not carefully chosen tokens, but prominent. They possess the same value within the frame as white faces, which (again, to me) is much more representative of the average Toronto streetcorner than most other images we see of contemporary Canadian cities. Recent Canadian film (not to mention television commericals and public affairs broadcasting) generally construct the urban public sphere as a uniform whitespace. To say nothing of the far-reaching effects this dominant image-making has, it is clear that these "random" shots are never random at all, but the products of the individual histories of the people who framed them. It should come as no surprise that a white middle-class journalist and cameraperson assigned to do "manin-the-street" interviews will select predominantly white middle class (and male) subjects. The weight of ignorance, prejudice and fear determine whom they choose to approach. In addition, the producer and editor back at the studio further winnow and refine this "chance" representation of the population. Similarly, a documentary director, cinematographer and editor share responsibility for constructing the views of public space that take the form of "casual" establishing shots. Hodge de Silva's films use this tool of realist style as one avenue for interpolating alternate content. It is elements like these that suggest in Hodge de Silva's work a nascent critique, the beginnings of a restructuring of the building blocks of documentary realism that might have developed into a much more forceful political voice.

Home Feeling: Struggle for a Community is the most fully realized of Hodge de Silva's films, both in terms of its success as a liberal, realist documentary, and in terms of its subtle adumbrations to that genre. Compared to similar black British documentaries about police-black community relations (Milton Bryan's The People's Account or Menelik Shabazz's Blood Alı Go Run, for example), there is very little direct critique of the police in Home Feeling. At its most pointed, the narration track notes that "As part of their routine patrol, police walk the corridors of Ontario Housing buildings just as they do the public's sidewalks." This is as angry as the film's overt voice gets. Nor are images of demonstrations, riots, looting or police beatings presented as evidence of crisis, again unlike the British work. Instead, Home Feeling prefers to indict police officers and administration with a strategic use of their own words, and to counter racist imagemaking by constituting the police — rather than black youth — as an unspoken, everpresent threat throughout.

The film begins with sound rather than image. As the National Film Board logo occupies the screen, a police radio crackles on the soundtrack (this juxtaposition may turn out to be Hodge de Silva's most subversive act). The first actual shot of the film is of a police cruiser patrolling the Jane-Finch neighborhood. The sound of the police radio continues, soon complemented by reggae music. In these first few moments the film establishes its two primary textual domains — the police and the West Indian community, and brings an important extra-textual domain into play — the NFB, as represented by its body-eye logo. The only element common to these three fields, as sound, or image, or both, is the police. The film maintains this insistence on police omnipresence through constant shots of police cars and officers patrolling the area.

So while the film makes no explicit statements against the Metropolitan Toronto Police force, its tone is unmistakable enough that a film catalogue produced by the NFB for school teachers can say:

The teacher may wish to supplement the anti-police material in the film with more analytical articles on how police think and work, and how minority youths relate to poverty, unemployment and discrimination. Focus on Canada, 87.

On its release, the film encountered open hostility from the Toronto police, who made efforts to block its public screening and broadcast.

Midway through *Home Feeling*, one of the women in a community discussion group notes that the police presence in the area "has a very startling psychological effect on you." This is a clue to *Home Feeling*'s second strategy. In addition to constructing the police as silent threat, the film also constructs black characters as subjects with psychology. Through the way the interviews were conducted and edited, these Jane-Finch residents are afforded a psychological complexity that goes beyond treating the black subject as an unindividuated victim of/respondent to oppression. This takes the comic form, in one case, of following a laid-off bricklayer's assistant who wants to be an interior decorator as he looks for assistance at an employment office.

In another instance, we see an unemployed waitress search fruitlessly for work, and hear her speak of how much she missed her children before they came up from the West Indies to join her. Again Hodge de Silva takes the scene beyond one of anonymous victimhood by including the woman's confession of depression after her children arrived and hardly knew her, and her subsequent treatment in group therapy. This small moment explores psychological vulnerability as a personal reaction to economic and social conditions in a way that both race relations documentaries and West Indian communities are usually unwilling to do. The waitress's narrative within the film also marks the subtle integration of a black nationalist agenda within a liberal one. She moves from unemployment, to rejection by white corporate business (McDonald's and Burger King), to rejection by a white-owned small business, and finally to employment in a black-owned business,

the Kensington Patty Palace. The point is made, but never stressed. All of this is to point out that the black subjects in *Home Feeling* never remain at the level of mute symbols standing for either victimhood or resistance. Hodge de Silva is careful to elicit and include material that represents the contradictions and full complexity of the lives she chose to film.

In attempting to situate Hodge de Silva within a number of very difficult circumstances of production and reception, it's important to remember her successes, though small, were highly significant. Hodge de Silva was not an independent filmmaker in any sense of the term. Hers was in fact a dependent cinema, with nearly every film she made directly governed by the money that funded it. In a way she follows in a tradition of new world black artists who, at the beginning of a movement, find themselves under the wing of white liberal patrons, and sometimes employ certain white liberal forms and concerns, but whose work still results in something extra, something beyond the external forces that shaped it. This is the history of the Harlem Renaissance, and it may be the destiny of any black cultural movement created within a white power structure.

However, judged by the standards of what critics call the committed documentary, Hodge de Silva comes up lacking. Tom Waugh lists the elements of that genre as 1) ideological principle, "a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-political transformation," 2) "activism, or intervention in the process of change itself," and 3) a "subject-centred" practice that fully involves the people engaged in these struggles. All of these elements are open to much debate, but for the purposes of Hodge de Silva's work, the last category proves most interesting. Speaking directly to the film practice of bodies like the NFB, British critic Jim Pines notes that

institutionalised "race relations" has a marginalising effect structurally and tends to reinforce rather than ameliorate the "otherness" of the subject — which documentary realism historically and representationally embodies. 29

It's ironic that Hodge de Silva, a Canadian-born black film-maker, chose to focus the only film she made specifically about black people on *West Indian*-born blacks, while Claire Prieto, a West-Indian born black filmmaker, has made films predominantly about established black Canadian communities. If Pines is correct, this is a direct function of the realist documentary genre, which necessarily constructs its subject as Other. But as mentioned above, *Home Feeling* demonstrates a tentative moving toward the film's subjects that provides a surplus-effect beyond the filmmaker-self/subject-other dynamic common to conventional realist documentaries.

Moving from the films' relationship to their subjects, I want to conclude by addressing how Hodge de Silva's films interact with their audience. To whom do these films speak, and how? In line with the workings of realist, social-issue documentary, most of Hodge de Silva's work constructs an ideal audience that is sympathetic to the film's subject but not directly involved — liberal outsiders reflective of the filmmaker's own relation to the material. Again without claiming too much for their powers of subversion, I would suggest that

Myself, Yourself and Home Feeling problematize that unified ideal audience somewhat. Though these films also use naturalized, "transparent" codes of cinematic address, and appeals to "common sense" notions of injustice, both attempt to speak to outsider and insider simultaneously. The subjects in Myself, Yourself provide strong figures of identification for viewers who have had similar experiences of racism at the same time as they stand as objects for sympathy for those who haven't. And as outlined above, Home Feeling contains understated but significant messages (the waitresses story) for those with the history to read them.

At this point it becomes important not to allow a discussion of the alternative readings these films may encourage in various audiences degenerate into the positing of a monolithic black audience capable of uniformly deciphering Hodge de Silva's secret codes. Particularly in Canada and other "new world" sites of black populations (though not exclusively), the concept of a black community united in a common cultural background and worldview is impossible to maintain. As Stuart Hall writes, one must admit

the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories, and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature. 28

In the realm of film form, differences in "cultural capital" also determine how a "black" audience will be constructed. Those educated to assimilate and enjoy documentary realist cinema will read *Myself, Yourself* or *Home Feeling* far differently than those educated to hold this style in high suspicion, or even derision. ¹

One can only speculate about the films Jennifer Hodge de Silva might have made. (One planned project was a feature film called No Crystal Stair.) What can profitably be accomplished is a more thorough consideration of the films she did

 In talking about patterns of viewer response and identification, it is important to keep in mind William Guynn's suggestion that the spectator typically takes in a documentary film in a manner very different from a narrative fiction, with different psychic processes at work. Documentary, he proposes, is on one level "a-cinematic":

The cinematic apparatus by its very configuration (the darkened theatre, the larger than life image, etc.) tenders a promise of libidinal pleasure that the spectator here is led to refuse: the documentary film is an object inappropriate to desire. 223

Documentary requires a higher degree of vigilance from the spectator than does the fiction film. Through its apparent relation to the reality of social existence, it invokes the defense mechanisms of the ego and calls on the operations of waking thought, controlled reasoning, and judgement. 222-23

complete, a consideration that moves beyond mere joy that they exist at all. Moreover, Hodge de Silva deserves to be rescued from those who would blithely celebrate the "truth" and "authenticity" of her films and leave untouched any examination of how they actually work. Too often black artists are taken for mere recorders of the experience of "their people," with no power or ability to shape experience within the language of their chosen medium. The cinema of duty has form as well as content. We can only understand it by exploring the complexities of both.

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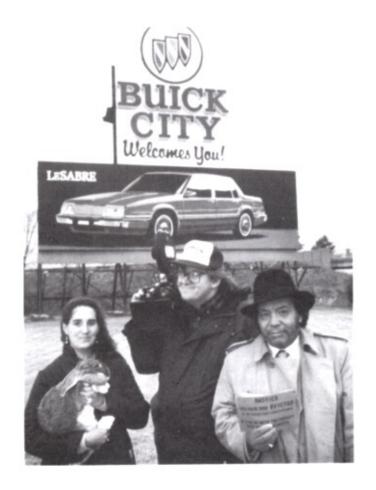
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Roger and Me, by Michael Moore



Embodied Knowledge and the Politics of Location

by Bill Nichols

"Documentary" suggests fullness and completion, knowledge and fact, explanations of the social world and its motivating mechanisms. More recently, though, documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective construction. Documentary has its troubles and solutions to them. They have to do with problems in the representation of people and the worlds they inhabit.

In particular, the troubles explored here revolve around specificity and corporeality. These terms identify a realm of embodied knowledge and situated activity. They imply an opposition to a still prevalent documentary tradition favoring disembodied knowledge and itinerant activity. The material, situated position of the body of the social actor is recruited, sublimated, repressed or discarded by narrative and mythopoetic agencies. History — embodied, corporeal history — is at odds with narrative and myth. Some documentaries have begun to insist on this. Ironically, one device for stressing this proposition is via the techniques of fiction, more to achieve a sense of situated subjectivity than to transform the historical person into a narrative character or mythic persona.¹

We may think of documentary as a system of representation. It shares a kinship with those other non-fictional systems that together make up what we may call the discourses of sobriety. Economics, politics, foreign policy, education, religion, welfare-these systems assume their discourses have instrumental power; they can and should alter the world itself, they can effect action and entail consequences. Such discourse has an air of sobriety since it is seldom receptive to "make-believe" characters, events or entire worlds (unless they serve as pragmatically useful simulations of the "real" one). Discourses of sobriety are sobering because they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent. Through them power exerts itself. Through them, things are made to happen. They are the vehicles of domination and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will. Some recent documentary has begun to question the value of sobri-

Can any lover of film also be a Platonist? Documentaries are, at one and the same time, less loved, by many, than fiction (they all too often parade their tedious alliance with the other discourses of sobriety) and less respected, by many, than other discourses of sobriety (they can never escape their imagistic status: they amount to sounds and images, shadowplay, or representations of that which we seem to be able to address by other means more directly). Representation is at the heart of this dilemma. To present a realistic likeness of something is to be self-effacing so that the likeness comes to the fore. To stand for someone or something else is to be selfassertive so that an issue or concern comes to the fore. These are two simultaneous acts of documentary representation. There is a tendency to distrust images as a form of political representation while over-valuing images as a form of visual representation. Documentary may be a slightly discredited member of the sobriety club; its power to affect others seems to arise from an unfair advantage, or handicap: it speaks a different language from the logo-centric ones of its cousins, near and far.

The act of representation no longer seems as clear cut as it once did. Representation is a three fold activity: the rendering of likenesses; the right to stand for another person or group, as in parliamentary representation; and the process of making a case, as in a legal representation of the facts. The issues of specificity and corporeality focus the tensions within this three-part definition of representation. Images are always of concrete, material things recorded at specific moments in time, but they often serve to point toward more general truths or issues. To what extent can the particular serve as illustration for the general? To what extent is the general a misunderstanding of the nature of the particular, the concrete, the everyday and what this means for historically located individuals? The body is a particularly acute reminder of specificity and the body of the filmmaker even more so. Where does the filmmaker stand and how do they represent their stance? To what extent should they question their right to represent the perceptions and concerns of others? Do they represent their own knowledge as situated or omniscient? What are the consequences of these choices?

Historical reality is under siege. Imperfect utopias and diverse affinities propose themselves as alternatives to the ordered lives constructed by the master narratives of Platonic reason, Christian salvation, capitalist progress and Marxist revolution. How do we tell what happened in the past if we do not have the familiar framework of the logic of problem solving, the theology of damnation and redemption, the economics of progress, or the politics of revolution to guide us? How do we represent — meaning to depict, to speak for, and to argue about what is no longer present — under these conditions? And, as a corollary, how do we represent individuals who may not represent the truth but only a partial, subjective view of it?

One well known answer that is still dominant but open to question is to use archival film footage and the testimony of experts or witnesses. For filmmakers this choice removed the need for reenactments with their embarrassing failures of authenticity. Reenactments risk implying greater truth-value for the recreated event than it deserves when it is merely an imitation or copy of what has already happened once and for all. But the matter of authenticity is not so easily settled. In what ways is a reenactment less authentic than hearing what someone says about an event that has long since happened while we see "authentic" archival images of the event itself? Does this strategy not confer greater truth-value on the spoken word than it deserves? Is the spoken word not a reenactment in its own right, an interpretation aided by hindsight and motivated by an implicit point of view shaped over time? Testimony and commentary gives priority less to what happened then in any pure sense than to what we now think happened and what this might mean for us.

One small crack in this assumption of the "authenticity" of archival images occurs with the use of fictional footage to reconstruct the impression of a past. Sometimes this footage is used for ironic effect as in The Making of a Legend (about the making of Gone With the Wind) where clips of Vivian Leigh's performance in fiction films serve to illustrate events from her actual life or in the opening to Roger and Me where clips of Hollywood genre films evoke the "realities" of boyhood fan-

See my "History, Myth and Narrative in Documentary Film," Film Ouarter!y 41, no I (Fall 1987): 9-20 for a more complete discussion of these three terms and their interrelationship.

tasies and ideals. In these cases, fiction film footage reverses the role of documentary film footage in fiction: instead of giving a greater sense of historical facticity to imaginary events, the footage gives a greater sense of personal subjectivity to historical events.

Archival footage, fact or fiction, avoids the problem of a "body too many" where an actor doubles for an historical figure. (Fictional footage, once identified as such, functions like a quotation - in brackets - rather than as a recreation; we understand that the fictional figure does not substitute for an historical person.) Actors can never be the person they imitate in reenactments. Historical documentary that relies on archival footage is faced with a "body too few," lacking both actors and the historical figure: the historical person is either deceased or no longer the person they used to be. Specificity arises as a challenge to find ways of representing the body of an historical figure, and, even more, to represent the subjectivity, perspective, style and perceptions of the person within a body that is surprisingly elusive. Archival footage is only a partial, though valuable, solution.

Reliance on testimony and commentary by witnesses and experts also raises the inevitable problem of belief or credibility. Our willingness to agree with what is said relies to a surprisingly large extent on rhetorical suasion and documentary convention. The filmmaker relays their tacit confidence in what is said to the viewer. Iconic authentication (filling the background of the shot with evidence of the speaker's status-bookshelves, laboratories, filming on location) heightens credibility. But as Peter Adair demonstrates in Some of These Stories Are True, what social actors say may as easily be fiction as historically authentic. (We do not know until we see the credits which of the three stories have been scripted, much as we cannot separate fact from fiction in No Lies, David Holzman's Diary or Daughter Rite until we see the credits, and grant them a veracity greater than the representations they refer to.)

The Thin Blue Line takes up a more complex strategy than that of The Making of a Legend. It challenges our conventional sense of authenticity. It does not use archival footage, either factual or fictitious, but instead uses reenactments of a crime for which the wrong man was sent to prison. The Thin Blue Line finds alternatives to archival footage partly because there was no documentary footage of the crime itself—the shooting of a policeman in Dallas, Texas—and partly because even if there were it would not reveal what Errol Morris wants most to reveal: the inner thoughts and subjective processes by which we each construct different histories that correspond to



Roger and Me, by Michael Moore

our present needs.

The Thin Blue Line detaches itself from the prevailing reliance of documentary on authentic images. Instead of "actual" proof — "real" images of the murder weapon or the crime itself, for example — Morris resorts to typical or stereotypical images of a crime and its prosecution. "Murder weapon," "handgun," 'pistol," "police interrogation," "signed confession," these stock items of the crime film appear as just that, stock images. They are iconic representations of such objects and activities in general rather than the specific instances relevant to this one case. These generalized images remind us of the degree to which our perception of the real is constructed for us by the codes and conventions brought into play within an institutional framework. The conventions of documentary themselves guarantee the authenticity they appear to refer to.

The Thin Blue Line also evokes a past self, the historical figure of the man, Randall Adams, as he was imagined or seen by others. Morris represents for us the figure or image, the stereotype of "criminal." He allows us to see how "criminality" is constructed by an historically, materially motivated subjectivity. There is no authentic image to be had and there is no way to guarantee that a reenactment will be accepted as the official version of "what really happened." Morris accepts these limitations and opts instead to show us how policemen and prosecutors, those accused and those accusing others, construct the past they need.



Roger and Me, by Michael Moore

Reenactment in The Thin Blue Line offers a sense of how memory and desire are historically situated and subjectively motivated, even in the thick of an impersonal process of legal justice. His multiple "flashbacks" to the police interrogation of Adams and to the scene of the crime, as reenacted by Morris, urge us to see the subjective dimension that permeates historical representation since each reenactment has the tone and expressive detail attributable to a particular social actor's point of view. Morris questions the reliability of evidence while still asserting that there is a reality to which memory and representation allude. Reality is more than what Lilly Tomlin has called a "collective hunch." It is an organized, commonsensical certainty. The organization of reality derives from an hegemonic process that subsumes and accounts for differences of interpretation within a single collective frame. Morris' own interpretation and implicit argument matter mightily for Randall Adams; it is not just a game of formal reflexivity or historical relativity. Like other documentaries within the framework of a discourse of sobriety, this film, too, has had a real impact and measurable effect: Randall Adams is now a free man, thanks in part to the evidence provided by The Thin Blue Line.

A second problem for documentary representation is specificity and the representation of self. How do we film the concrete and unique but draw conclusions that transcend it? Should we? What generalizations are appropriate? What categories can serve to facilitate understanding, and the acceptance of difference, rather than close down receptivity to the unique in the name of the stereotypical, reducing difference to the measure of otherness, superiority and dominance?

One way to get specific is to ask about the actual person who makes the film. We cannot discuss the particular for long without addressing the peculiarity of the often absent filmmaker who urges us to draw larger lessons from the specific ones he or she learned and filmed. This is an old convention in documentary. It feels "natural" for events to refer to larger issues. They fall into place along the plot lines of our master narratives. We assume they hold greater importance than the person or presence of the filmmaker who provides them for us. But this begs the central question. This is somewhat easier to see if we put another assumption into question. What if the person filming is not "one of us" but someone whose location or position is already marked as different? This becomes particularly noticeable when the filmmaker is an exile, a Third World exile, for example, who then represents for us the first world "sanctuary" they inhabit. The self-

evident quality of situations and events becomes disturbed; they fall subject to unexpected reinterpretations that undercut the naturalness they might well have otherwise had.

One excellent example is Marilu Mallet's *Unfinished Diary*. The film, by a Chilean exile living in Montreal, addresses the politics of location. It stresses the centrality of the local over the global, the specific over the general, the concrete over the abstract. The experience of place and subjectivity is tactile, everyday, corporeal. *Unfinished Diary* is not an exercise in imagination, an expansion of self by constructing an Other, like the Orient, Third World, or even Canada that can then provide the welcoming features of an old, familiar friend. It is not engaged in the game of representing a foreign culture whose mystery the process of translation into familiar concepts and categories dispels by means of commonsense.

Mallet's stress on the incidental and specific moments in her own daily life, coupled to her memories of Chile and longing to have a place of her own, render *Unfinished Diary* the opposite of the travelogue or its "respectable," that is, better disciplined, sibling, the ethnography. Movement and travel no longer serve as a symbol for the expansion of one's moral framework, the discovery of cultural relativity, the heroics of salvage anthropology, the rituals of self-improvement in the bildungsroman tradition, or as training in the civic responsibilities of empire. Movement and travel no longer legitimate the subject's right to speak through/with disembodied discourses, disembodied but master narratives and

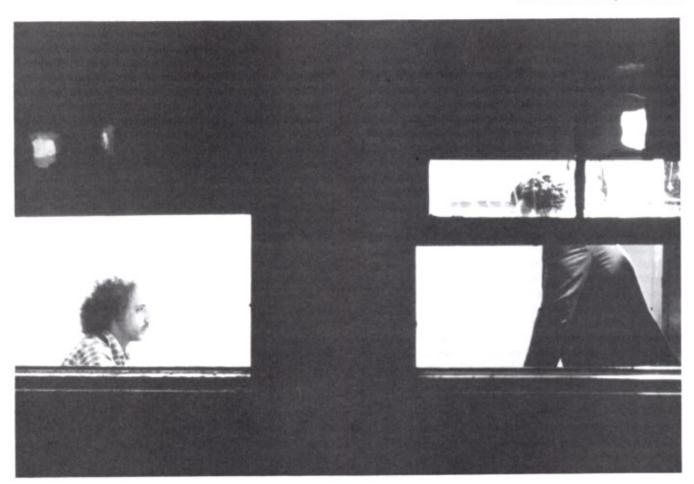
mythologies in which the corporeal I who speaks dissolves itself into a disembodied, depersonalized, institutional discourse of power and knowledge. This is the Griersonian legacy in documentary that Mallet rejects.

For Mallet, as for the disposssed exiles and members of a diaspora, movement and travel become an experience of displacement and dislocation, of social and cultural estrangement, of survival, and self-preservation. Mallet explores and proposes strategies of resistance practiced through an embodied, corporeal discourse, and practice, of self-representation. This is vividly represented in two sequential scenes. The first is of Mallet, her child and her husband at the time, Michael Rubbo, at home with other Chilean exiles who entertain them with clever repartée spoken to guitar accompaniment. The second is of Mallet and Rubbo in their kitchen discussing the previous scene, Mallet's film, and their relationship. It represents a parting of the ways. Rubbo describes how he would have filmed the scene, capturing the reality of their son's inability to understand the repartée since it is in Spanish. (Mallet speaks in French, Rubbo in English in this scene about speech, communication and meaning.) Mallet refuses to accept his sense of reality; she is after something different. This is left undefined but, to me, it involves the musical repartée itself as a form of embodied lamentation and protest and the differing responses to it.

The kitchen scene also defines their differences in outlook. Rubbo wants to look in on unfamiliar realities; Mallet wants to speak of her own experience. Rubbo declares them incompatible as a couple; Mallet does not disagree, but whereas Rubbo announces it as a discovered fact, Mallet responds to it as a painful hurt with which she must still come to terms. The scene is not from a Michael Rubbo film, as Mallet puts it at one point, where we might expect to learn about contemporary marital difficulties from the perspective of and with the voiced observations of investigative cineaste Michael Rubbo (as we learn about cosmetic surgery in Rubbo's Daisy: The Story of a Facelift). Instead the scene represents (in the multiple senses of the word) the marital difficulty it might otherwise report. Not shot from Mallet's point of view in a literal sense, the absence of any external, mediating commentary or perspective together with the degree to which the filmmaker is herself implicated in the emotional intensity of the scene makes it almost impossible to regard it as an example of anything other than itself. As a result, it represents the specificity of exile and dislocation that refuses to become a theory of or commentary on itself. 2

The politics of location points to the importance of testimonial literature and first-person filmmaking. Testimonials are first person, oral more than literary, personal more than theoretical. Such work explores the personal as political at the

The Thin Blue Line, by Errol Morris



level of textual self-representation as well as at the level of lived experience. It contrasts with the traditional essay where the authorial "I" speaks to and on behalf of a presumed collectivity. The "I" of testimonials embodies social affinities but is also acutely aware of social difference, marginality and its own place among the so-called Others of hegemonic discourse. (Rigoberta Menchu's I, Rigorberta and Cherie Moraga's Loving in the War Years are excellent examples of written testimonials that parallel many of the preoccupations of Mallet's Unfinished Diary.) Mallet's style for locating herself, her displacement of the 'history lesson" from its privileged position of justification for or conclusion to her account, her refusal to make herself into the figure of the tour guide that most firstperson commentary in documentary evokes, pointedly identifying for us the larger truths and bigger issues exemplified by her particular experience all propose a radically distinct model for documentary representation.

Her scenes cannot be described as examples, models or evidence in the service of an argument without betraying the very strategy she adopts. They are scenes not from any marriage but her marriage, not from any life but her life. Their significance resides in their particularity not in their typicality. To take them as examples or evidence is to slide toward a Geertzian problematic where representation becomes the province of Us discussing Them in ways that no longer matter very much to Them. ³

Raoul Ruiz, a Chilean exile working mostly in France, also addresses the politics of location in his *De Grands Evénements et des gens ordinaire (Great Events and Ordinary People)*. About a national election as seen in his own Parisian arrondisement, *Great Events and Ordinary People* is also a meditation on documentary form. It questions the odd way in which images in documentary yield an impression of reality when they are often so disdainful of any specific time and place. In classic, Griersonian documentary and television journalism images are wrenched from all manner of locations as example, model or evidence. Rutz demonstrates the effect with a series of disparate still life images but they serve only as evidence of this effect itself rather than of any quality inherent in the historical world.

Ruiz' own strategy carries us through a series of observations that refuse to add up or present the big picture. When he does suggest a larger frame it is less via a linear argument, which has vacuumed up visible fragments of the world and pasted them into a new semantic order, than via an associational, surreal juxtaposition that stresses the incommensurate, unreconcilable quality of sound and image, here and now, there and then, Chile and France, native/exile, first world/third world. A French election is one thing, a Chilean exile in Paris another, the images of the Third World that circulate within the first still another. No synthesis is attempted, only recognition of the violence hegemonic unity and anthropological description, thick or thin, requires. It is a requirement Rutz refuses. As the film's coda puts it in an ironic voice-over statement to disparate images of Third World culture (the very type of images Rutz has warned us against as Our kind of imaginary representation of the world out there):

In this way the future documentary will endlessly repeat these three truths: So long as poverty exists, we shall still be rich.

So long as sadness exists, we shall still be happy.

So long as prisons exist, we shall still be free.

A politics of location inevitably poses questions about the body. ⁴ We may think of the body as the most local and most specific aspect of ourselves. It can also be a quite troublesome

- 2. Mallet's film contrasts significantly with Ross Mcllhee's Sherman's March. Mcllhee remains within the travel/ethnography tradition where the personal journey presents the possibility of self-discovery rather than the threat of loss and even annihilation. We have little sense of that multiplicity of subjectivities that figures so heavily in the consciousness and experience of exile in Mcllhee's diaristic adventure. On the contrary, the self he represents is the unified subject of classic western narrative, embarked on the equally classic quest, albeit in a slightly ironic vein, for a suitable female mate. Mcllhee, like travel writers for the last several centuries, defines himself in juxtaposition to the world he moves through rather than in relation to a world that surrounds and constrains him.
- 3. In "Thick Description: Towards an Interpretative Theory of Culture," Clifford Geertz offers an enlighteningly nuanced, exemplarily empathetic account of the need to interpret the actions of others in meaningful terms. His distinctions among a blink, a wink and a parody of a wink, and among the perspectives and values of a Berber tribe, a Jewish trader and a French colonial officer in Morocco remind us how important it is to understand the meanings others intend or achieve. Anthropology takes up the challenge of representing the actions of others meaningfully. Representation is therefore a dominant characteristic of anthropology, as it is of documentary. Mastering the tools of anthropological representation is a crucial challenge for the student of this discipline. Representation is the central problematic of this discipline. Anthropology is another word for institutionalized techniques designed for the representation of others. (Documentary is another word.) But this conception of anthropology, Geertz's conception, creates, but does not acknowledge, representation as trouble for the Other. Who speaks to whom of what? We speak of them to us. This is the trouble. Others are represented (passive tense) without the possibility of self-representation. This goes unrecognized since anthropological training gives the anthropologist the power to represent others meaningfully - for other anthropologists. We might reformulate Geertz's theoretical proposal in other words: To the extent that the art of anthropological thickness uses the Other as an example in a discourse where s/he lacks representation of his/her own, anthropology is a poisonous art, recruiting, from the start, representation into the terms of hierarchy rather than difference.
- 4. 1 have explored this question in two previous, related essays, 'Questions of Magnitude," in John Corner, ed., *The Documentary and Mass Media* (London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1986): 107-122 and "History, Myth and Narrative in Documentary,' *Film Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (Fall 1987): 9-20.



Unfinished Diary, by Marilu Mallet

element when we wish to generalize beyond ourselves and transcend our corporeal bounds. We can regard the body in documentary from three perspectives, each representing a different dimension of our conception of self: 1) the body of the social actor or historical person which is agent and subject of historical actions and events, situations and experiences; 2) as the body of a narrative character which is the focus of actions and enigmas, helpers and donors all propelling the narrative toward closure; and, 3) as a mythic, ahistorical persona, type, icon or fetish which serves as the object of both desire and identification.

Tensions exist among these choices. For example, between the historically conditional body of a social actor and the ahistorical icon or fetish of a mythic persona the vicissitudes of time clash with the claims of immortality. The tension is all the stronger when it exists in relation to one and the same body such as we find with an Adolf Hitler, Joan of Arc, Pele, or Marilyn Monroe. Monroe was simultaneously an historical person, subject to the same vicissitudes as any other person; a narrative character in stories not of her own making (the tragic figure of innocence destroyed by commerce, the victim of male fantasy, etc.); and a mythic persona or fetish (comedienne extraordinary, American sex goddess, etc.).

Brenda Longfellow's Our Marilyn speaks in the first person, in the voice of another exile from the institutional domain of representation, the voice of a woman reflecting on her own identity and its social construction. The confessional voice-over commentary remains unattached to a visible body of its own. Perhaps it stands for the filmmaker; maybe it is representative for many Canadian women. In either case, it is a voice reflecting on questions of body image more than the fact of its sheer physical presence. The quest for a body image to give psychic incarnation to that (still absent) presence motivates the commentary. *Our Marilyn* is about the narrator's search for a specific female identity to the extent that it is based on a body other than her own. This other body is imaginary but also divided — divided in this case by national identity and alternative subjectivities.

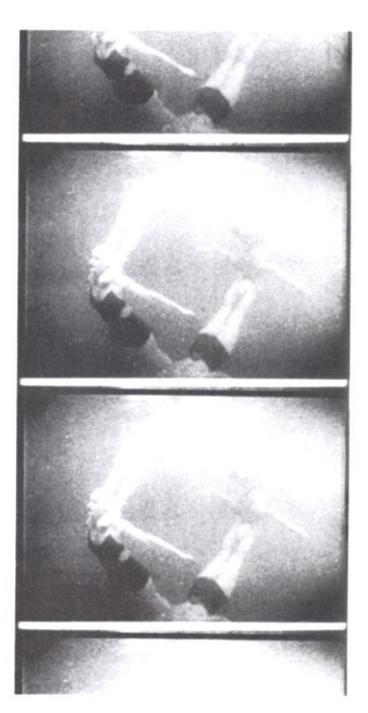
Is "our" Marilyn, Marilyn Bell, a long distance Canadian swimmer who was the first woman to swim across Lake Ontario, to be the mirror of "myself" or is "their" Marilyn, Marilyn Monroe, to represent the *me* that must come into being in the space between such alternatives? The historical body takes form along the armatures of historical, mythic and narrative options made available to it. *Our Marilyn* asks how to represent, in cinematic form, the female body—not as idealized nude, or object of desire; not as temptress or provider but as a body *in* action. The desired Marilyn represents a state of physical being and action, not a frozen icon or image, not a character in someone else's narrative, but a *vehicle* for the presentation of self.

Our Marilyn asks how we may represent women's subjective experience of corporeal being. How can the female body be the subject of a film, centered in the frame, and still not be the object of male erotic pleasure? To what extent can physical endurance and psychic exhaustion such as that experi-

enced by Marilyn Bell during her almost day-long swim be represented without the concomitant fetishization/eroticization of physical effort found in conventional fictions (think of the films of Ethel Merman, Delores Del Rio in general, or, more recent works like *Personal Best* and *Flashdance*)? Can the viewer be constructed, as Teresa de Lauretis proposes, as female regardless of the viewer's actual gender? ⁵

Our Marilyn suggests ways in which that question can be answered affirmatively through the experimental techniques it deploys (optical printing, sound effects, slow motion, and the prolongation of the act of marathon swimming) to immerse us literally and metaphorically in the sensations of the female body in action, in motion. An extended portion of the film is given over to what is usually neglected in the coverage of marathon-like events: the middle, that infinite moment of sustained but repetitive effort and the hallucinatory state of mind it induces that constitutes the basic substance of physical endurance. We see and hear what Marilyn Bell might have seen as she churns on through the cold lake waters toward a destination that remains far beyond sight. It approximates, ironically, an out-of-body experience in which physical motion establishes one rhythm while the mind explores spaces and sensations of its own devising. This remarkably prolonged representation supports neither narrative suspense nor mythic idealization. Like Errol Morris's reenactments of the murder at the center of The Thin Blue Line, the reenactment of Bell's epic swim instills an all-too-readily lost subjective dimension to historical fact. This is not a projected image of male desire but a more direct representation of female subjectivity arising from an act of the physical body and historical person.

Differences circulate within the realm of social experience and risk aligning themselves along the fault lines of the social imaginary - them /us, masculine/feminine, Canadian/ American, either / or. Our Marilyn leaves differences "at sea", circulating around questions of crucial importance. It refuses to generalize or conclude, to abstract from the particular to the universal. Physical effort, swimming in this case, is affiliated less with a narrative of self-discovery or conquest than with disembodiment or dislocation. Marilyn Bell's achievement occupies a largely forgotten space in a cultural history for which Marilyn Monroe represents an apotheosis. Bell, like Mallet and Ruiz, struggled to define a space of her own. The voice-over commentator of Our Marilyn continues that struggle, using the icons and traces of the historical that have been deposited in the social imaginary. Our Marilyn brings the power of the universal, of the mythical and fetishistic, down to the level of immediate experience and individual subjectivity. How does a text restore that order of magnitude which characterizes lived experience when it can only make representations of what lies beyond its own bounds? One set of answers, it seems, has less to do with invoking the power of disembodied knowledge and histoire/langue and much more to do with the possibilities afforded by situated knowledge, discours/parole and those subjectivities located in corporeal experience.



Our Marilyn, by Brenda Longfellow

Teresa de Lauretis, "Guerrilla in the Midst: Women's Cinema in the 80s," Screen 31, no. I (Spring 1990): 6-25.

Proudly She Marches

WARTIME PROPAGANDA AND THE LESBIAN SPECTATOR

> Lesbianism cannot be 'expressed' by heterosexist culture, and yet it must nevertheless be understood as the subtext to the master narrative, the forcibly repressed 'other' to patriarchal heterosexuality against which our society defines itself. Lesbian communities constitute themselves invisibly. The daily violence perpetrated against us, whether by the institutions of compulsory heterosexuality or direct acts of physical brutality, cause many of us to constitute our communities and sometimes our own identities covertly. That our communities endure suggests that oppositional cultural practices are shared by us, enabling the emergence and sustainment of a sort of collective lesbian imaginary. Typically constructed as deviants in mainstream representations, the constitution of our collective identities involves us in a range of sub-textual 'reading' practices, most of which fall outside of the theoretical terrain of much of feminist film theory.

In particular, feminist writing on film and sexual difference tends to bracket out the film-spectator relationship from other dimensions of social life, emphasizing the role of a film's internal formal qualities in

determining that relationship. Yet strictly formal analyses of the representation of women belie an overly simplistic account of the relationship between films and the constitution of gendered identities. The individual in the theatre is collapsed into subject positions constructed by the discursive operations of a film, a necessary correspondence is assumed

by Marilyn Burgess



Jane Marsh's Proudly She Marches, 1940

between them, and this conflation of identity and discursive subject positioning leaves the individual who is *making sense* unsatisfactorily theorized.

Films do not fix viewers into subjective locations outside of social processes because real viewers never confront them in the abstract. Lesbians, for example, are always, and at all times, "subjects in history, living in given social formations,

1. Stuart Hall, "Introduction to Media Studies" in Stuart Hall, editor, (1980) *Culture, Media, Language*, 1980, Hutchinson, London.

rather than mere subjects of a single text." Making sense is the process whereby the lesbian spectator, in her interaction with both the film and a host of other discourses and social practices, is inscribed and inscribes herself within historically specific narratives of identity. Obsessed with universal and transhistorical abstractions of sexual difference, the psychoanalytic paradigm offers no adequate way of theorizing collective identities within sex such as ethnicity or sexual orientation which also work to 'en-gender' us (DeLauretis, 1987). While it does not preclude other relations which may construct subjectivities for a single individual, psychoanalytic

theory nevertheless does not adequately account for how social constructions of self might intersect with the physical operations at work in the narrowly defined screen-spectator relationship.

When the sense we make of our everyday experience as lesbians is mapped into the possible meanings a given film can generate, we begin to see the ambivalent status that discursively positioned subjectivities may have for some of us. Insisting on their fundamental articulation through the larger social scene of everyday life undermines the assumed monolithic power of narrative realism to position spectators in 'a certain (heterosexual) way' and allows us to re-think the relationship between audience constituencies and realist films. A wartime recruiting film produced by John Grierson's National Film Board and directed by Jane Marsh, *Proudly She Marches*, (1940), is one such realist film which needs to be reconsidered with respect to a lesbian audience.

Promising that the Canadian Forces can 'liberate' women from the tyranny of the requirements of femininity — passivity, beauty, etc. — the film is a short, idealized documentary about live in the Canadian Forces done in the classic style of realist images over which is dubbed a rousing commentary. By its illustration of the happy-go-lucky world of women and work, the film constructs a femininity based on woman-bonding and women in action. Although the film does not explicitly address a lesbian audience, both its ambiguously constructed representations of sexuality and gender in relation to heterosexism and patriarchy and its depiction of sisterly comraderie lend themselves particularly well to a lesbian reading.

REAL DESIRES AND FILM STORIES

Proudly She Marches deserves to be considered in a complex relation to reading practices, historical location and theories of narrative film. Somewhat a-typically, Marsh's film contains important narrative elements which structure the film around the axis of looking relations. The importance of how we in lesbian communities look at other women suggests some interesting correspondences with the mechanisms of identification that the film deploys. Similarly, the ambiguous organization of desire within the film makes it particularly susceptible to a reading practice which moves 'against the grain' of heterosexually organized narratives. Following Nichols' discussion of the narrative qualities of documentary filmmaking (Nichols, 1981), Proudly She Marches can and should be analyzed both with respect to theories of narrative realism, and also with respect to the larger scene in which it is at various times located.

Among the significant narrative elements Nichols identifies are the coherent organization of time into an imaginary diegesis, usually constituted by a voice over narration, the creation of a spatio-temporal universe consonant with the 'real' world, and the imaginary autonomy of the film's characters, who are supposed to be 'real' people. Furthermore, mode of address invokes an ideal subject, providing the viewer's point of entry into the film and creating the conditions for the spectator's desire for recognition, unity and fixity. What the subject 'lacks' in relation to documentary film is the knowledge the film promises to deliver, a condition of desire which sustains the spectator's interest in the film to its closure

Proudly She Marches has sufficient number of these narrative elements to merit analysis as a narrative realist film. Mobilizing the psychoanalytic theory of looking relations is relevant as well, as these play an important part in organizing the film's diegesis around desire. Done in the style of direct address, the 'plot' unfolds through the telling of the main character's story in voice-over, illustrated by image sequences which follow the codes of classical narrative realism.2 According to the classical documentary formula, the verbal sound track dominates and organizes all other tracks, providing the viewer's point of entry into the film which, fifty years later, is at best ironic. Further weakened by the complete absence of location sync sound, the meanings of the film's images are not anchored to any time and place, leaving them open to the interpretive gaze of the lesbian spectator looking for some likeness of herself in any film, more so in the films of the past. The desire invoked by Proudly She Marches can therefore have as its object knowledge about the history of women in the Canadian army or recognition of the presence of lesbians there. It depends on who and where you are socially, as a spectator.

In the complex relationships between social practices and the criss-cross of competing discourses which constitute social meaning, contradictions may arise which can overdetermine the discursive operations of realist films, even carefully engineered propaganda films. To the extent that we cannot know a-priori the complex of discourses through which any spectator is constructed when viewing a film, we can say that *any* film is read unpredictably. It is in this light that I wish to make the case the Jane Marsh's film can be pulled into the social imaginary of some lesbian communities.

Circulating fifty years after its initial release, in a different historical context, *Proudly She Marches* has been brought into the social space of lesbian feminist problematics in Sarah Diamond's *Keeping the home fires burning* (1988) and my own A Woman in my Platoon (1989), while Stuart Marshall's Comrades in Arms (1990) makes use of similar sequences culled from British recruiting films of the same era.⁴

- 2. Almost all the films made by the National Film Board under John Grierson's leadership were compilation films made by cutting and re-splicing 'found' films together and adding a voice over commentary to facilitate comprehension. Jane Marsh strayed from this practice when she shot some original material for inclusion in the film. The scenes of the new recruit alone in her bedroom were thus original to this film. For further information, see Joyce Nelson, *The Colonized Eye: Rethinking the Grierson Legend*, 1988, Toronto: Between the Lines Press.
- 3. When I am not writing, I am also a video producer.
- 4. Since virtually all the images of war and army life included in NFB wartime propaganda films were 'borrowed' from other films, usually British or American, it seems likely that Marshall would have seen either the actual footage in *Proudly She Marches* or something very similar when he researched archival material for his own film.



Women Are Warriors, NFB

Diamond, Marshall, and myself have used these images to reframe what we, as lesbians or gay men, have seen in them: something of ourselves.

LESBIANS LOOK OUT

Proudly She Marches is not a film either by, for or about lesbians. The army does not invite lesbians to join the 'war effort,' peacetime or wartime and recruiting films have never overtly appealed to lesbian spectators. The Canadian Forces internal regulation on homosexuality reads:

Service policy does not allow homosexual members or members with s sexual abnormality to be retained in the CF (Canadian Forces). When it is decided that a member is to be released, appropriate action shall be taken as quickly as possible, with a minimum of publicity. ⁵

Canadian Forces service policy notwithstanding, Marsh's film, which explicitly addresses women, is structured by the titillating fragments of a strip tease.⁶ Scenes of a new recruit in various states of undress show her daydreaming about her women friends in the army while the plaintive airs of a jazz tune set the mood. Each reverie provides the context for examining one of the careers available to women who enlist. Once sexualized in this way, the possibilities for a lesbian reading of this character are sustained to the film's closure, where she heads off to her new life in the Forces with a sister soldier.

We are introduced to the young seductress as she lies across her narrow bed. fully clothed (in civvies) and playing with a kitten held at arms length above her. (If there is one cliché about lesbians it is that we love cats!) In the distance, we can see her uniform hanging from the bed post. The walls of her room are covered with photos of movie stars. This is a single girl's room (another cliché about closeted lesbians - they are single girls). The sequence begins with a close up on the kitten held up at arms length as the camera pans down the young woman's arms to settle on her face in intimate close up, seen from above. She is laughing and smiling, clearly enjoying herself. Her position in the bed and the position of the camera above her give her pleasure a certain sexual connotation, albeit of a masturbatory kind, as it is unrelated in any way to the usual boyfriend or romance. It is sexuality in its rawest form, for the sheer pleasure of it.

In the sequences that come after, also shot specifically for the film, the new

recruit's pleasure (sexualized by the context of bedroom and undress) is further constructed in terms of her gaze. While the desiring gaze is normally associated with male characters in the film, the circumstances in which *Proudly She Marches* was made allowed for the possibility to 'deviate' from this standard.

Looking is a form of sexual (and social) power, for by it an object of desire is appropriated for pleasure. I myself was looking for lesbians as I watched this film for the first time. In heterosexist and patriarchal culture, the power to look is

- Canadian Forces Canadian Forces Regulations, Administrative Order 19-20, 1976.
- As explained in footnote 1, the narrative sequences were shot for the film.
- 7. Being looked at may also be a form of sexual pleasure, but it is not tied up with the fantasy of the exercise of power but rather in the relinquishing of it.
- 8. I was at the time researching archival footage for possible inclusion in my videotape, A Woman in My Platoon (1989) about the forced expulsion of lesbians to this day in the Canadian Armed Forces.

reserved for men. Yet lesbians also look — at other lesbians — because homosexuality for women is not just a matter of sexual orientation, it is a matter of orientation of attention: of where we look and what we see. In the words of Marilyn Frye, "lesbians are woman seers." ⁹

The event of becoming a lesbian is a reorientation of attention in a kind of ontological conversion. It is characterized by a feeling of a world dissolving, and by a feeling of disengagement and re-engagement of one's power as a perceiver. ¹⁰

Looking is one of the strongest codes in the covert world of lesbian communities. It is an unspoken sign, a sign of primary identification, necessary because of our need to remain invisible. Typically, two women look into each other's eyes and hold the glance, waiting for the other to look back in acknowledgement. As an address, it ranges from casual notice to a more insisting invitation. It is always returned.

Lesbian desire, which depends on our recognition of other women, can override the subjective operations of a realist film since the lesbian spectator may not be interested in what the text typically sets up as the preferred reading. Because of our very normal need to see ourselves mirrored in our cultural experiences, we find lesbian content in sub-textual meanings, discovering the latent homosexual repressions in the 'cracks' of a film's sutures. So, like any spectator, a lesbian may at times take pleasure in taking up the positions offered by film, while at other times, her reading may be in resistance to its preferred reading.

This raises important questions in regard to psychoanalytic film theory. In particular, it suggests that visual pleasure is not limited to scopophilia and the fixing gaze of voyeurism which typically order narrative realism. The various ways that a lesbian spectator might negotiate a film's subject positions can only be analyzed within the larger social context in which consciousness is always already taking shape.

In keeping with the ambiguous construction of gender and sexuality in this film, realist viewing relations which privilege the male spectator are often reversed, perhaps because its purpose was to recruit women for action, not to inscribe them into traditional passivity. The film deploys relations of looking synonymously with the way in which it constructs viewing pleasure, through the construction of the female point of view. In an early strip tease sequence, an over-the-shoulder shot of the semi-clad recruit opening a photo album is followed by a close up of a photograph of her friend "Beth" at the wheel of her car. Sitting in her bed, the woman's dreamy gaze comes to rest on another woman. In Frye's words,

Attention is a kind of passion...What lesbians see is what makes them lesbians and their seeing is why they have to be excluded from the social order. Lesbians are woman-seers.¹¹

A *lesbian* gaze leads us into Beth's world and her career in the army, a structuring device used several times throughout the film.

The next fantasy introduces "Dorothy" as the "lesbian"

recruit sways to the slow and languorous jazz tune, by now clad only in a slip, staring dreamily ahead as she puts on her stockings. The camera pans down one of her stockinged legs as she suggestively slides her pointed toe over another photo in her album. "Dorothy" looks back at us from the page. This time, the woman's gaze is aimed at the lesbian spectator, for whom the camera 'stands in,' in an exchange of looks which mimics the ritual of lesbian recognition of self and other lesbians. Dorothy, of course, will go on to become a professional photographer in the army, a scenario which allows for some interesting role reversals, extending the promise that in the Forces, women have the power to look.

There is at least one other signification scene in which the 'relay of looks' occurs between actress and spectator, "sewing" the lesbian viewer into a sapphic fantasy of feminine desire. Seated in a cafeteria surrounded by other recruits, Beth scoops up some food and slowly puts it in her mouth. She smiles into the camera, looking directly at the lesbian spectator, and then closes her eyes in a moment of sensual ecstasy as she savours her food (army chow at that!). This girl's all too obvious desire catches us in its construction by the sequence of shots directing Beth's sexualized gaze out at us, and by the significance this relay of looks has in the lesbian community.

GIRL WORLD

In much the same way that individual women are eroticized in this film, (no doubt for the pleasure of a lesbian audience!), numerous scenes of women together evoke the "lesbian continuum" of resistance to heterosexuality (Rich, 1983). These may appear as representations of our own lesbian existence, which of itself enables us to see women's bonding. A spectator located within everyday lesbian social practice, subjectively constituted by the erotically charged recognition of self and other lesbians can choose to interpret a number of scenes in this way. Sequences that compare army life to summer camp, boarding schools, and other sororities also map out moments of erotic bonding. Whether it be couples walking to the church, or 'tête à têtes' between gardeners and clerical workers, or off-duty soldiers standing arms wrapped around each other, a lesbian spectator has numerous opportunities to spot the 'lesbian continuum' in this world of women. Or again, she might find it in the highly suggestive pillow fight that closes the barracks scene. As the new recruits awaken in the foreground of the screen, one tugging on the leg of the other in the bunk above her, pulling her down against herself as the former defends herself with her pillow. Finally, lesbian audiences will most certainly identify themselves in the images of women playing sports together (another cliché representation of lesbians).

Significantly, this sequence is divided between its emphasis on Amazonian ability and prowess on the one hand, and

Marilyn Frye, The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory, 1978, The Crossing Press, Freedom, California, p. 172
 Ibid, p. 171

^{11.} Ibid, p. 172

the intimacy of women's friendships and pleasure on the other. The sub-textual motif of sexual pleasure recurs here again when a young swimmer looks up into the camera from a swimming pool. She smiles into the camera, raising her body slightly towards us and then falls back in a splash of water. The framing on her is very tight at first, creating a sense of intimacy, emphasized by her slow movement towards us. The spray of water around her recalls the metaphoric equation of female sexuality with the sea. The next shot is extraordinary for its resonance with the first. A row of swimmers with arms over their heads sit on the edge of a pool and simultaneously dive into it, all smiles and giggles. Their pleasure in the water echoes that of the swimmer in the preceding shot, associated once again with sensual pleasure.

GIRLS IN UNIFORM STATE SANCTIONED DRAGE

From its ironic introduction to its illustration of the happy-golucky world of women and work, the film depicts a femininity based on woman-bonding and women in action. In it, the 'masquerade' of heterosexism - the marker of female dress - is exchanged for butch uniforms and same sex relationships. Like all women, lesbians dress in a variety of ways. However, a certain type of dress has typically been associated with us, or rather with 'butch' lesbians. This is, of course, male drag. In her discussion of the origins of this practice in England, Esther Newton (1984) explains that twentieth century bourgeois women who wanted to break out of the asexual model of Romantic friendship popularized in the previous century had to adopt the model of male desire as there was no developed female sexual discourse in Victorian culture. Thus, cross-gender figures such as Radclyffe Hall adopted the dress and behaviour designated as exclusively masculine, becoming the public symbol of the social/sexual category Tesbian.

The association of lesbians and masculinity persists to this day, both as a homophobic stereotype and (in the wake of the morally constraining '70's) as an increasingly popular investment in fantasy by lesbians. The army uniform with its jacket, tie, boots and cap, is clearly a man's dress adapted for women and one can readily see why it appeals to lesbians wishing to appear more masculine. It also confers authority and power, both normally reserved for men. In Proudly She Marches, the uniform in itself cannot transform all the women in the film into lesbians but it does open the way for such an identification by the emphasis given to the ritual of dressing (which functions as a closure to the ritualized spectacle of un-dressing which precedes it). To the beat of the sexy jazz tune once again, the dressing scene begins with the new soldier standing in her underwear before her mirror surrounded by photos of female movie stars. She adjusts the snapshot of her girlfriend pasted in the corner of the mirror and slowly dons her uniform item by item. In a studious montage, she lifts her jacket from its hanger, slides it on, straightens her tie - a cliché of male dressing - and puts on her cap. Attention to such details provide a point of identification for the "mannish" lesbian (and no doubt by now potential recruit herself!) who

cross-dresses in 'real' life.

CONCLUSION

Interpretive practices are socially located and inscribe film viewers into a complex intercrossing of narratives of identity. In spite of the signifying mechanisms mobilized by Proudly She Marches, the film can be pulled into the socially produced space of lesbian imagination. However seductive psychoanalysis may be as an interpretive model for feminist film criticism, alone it cannot account for oppositional practices which enable different relationships to exist between films and spectators. The ambiguous construction of gender in relation to patriarchy in Proudly She Marches at best ambivalently represses the master narrative of heterosexuality, allowing the lesbian sub-text to emerge rather easily. Lesbian re-visioning demands that we also re-examine realist films in general with respect to socially differentiated audience constituencies. Theorists' near obsession with classical narrative films has left little room for understanding the ways in which propaganda films, of which Canada has a long history, have worked in our society to position people within constraining political agendas. I chose to analyze Proudly She Marches from the perspective of a lesbian spectator in order to signal some of the limits to the power of film to position viewers in any way. A lesbian spectator is not a psychoanalytic abstraction (though some might prefer if she were), but a social person grounded in the everyday experience of her community, the likeliest place from which to make sense of Proudly She Marches.

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Words of Command

NOTES ON CULTURAL AND POLITICAL INFLECTIONS OF DIRECT CINEMA IN INDIAN INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY

by Tom Waugh

"The lament first makes the indictment; and then it makes an appeal. In the period that follows, the words of command are heard."

- Frantz Fanon, THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH.

The discussion around Third (World) Cinema(s)¹, as it has been proliferating in the Film Studies milieu, gives short shrift to documentary work despite the fact that many of the prototypes of this cinema, from *Hour of the Furnaces* to *The Battle of Chile*, are within the documentary tradition. At the same time, we still pay considerable attention to nonfiction images by Euro-American imagemakers of Third World societies. All but swamped under the media flood of earth-quakes, violence, deprivation, and indebtedness, "Northern" independents making images of the "South" tend to fall into three main camps: 1) the left solidarity advocates, following in the tradition of Ivens and Marker and showing no signs of

slowing down in the 1990s, 2) the "ethnographers", descendants of Flaherty, from the mystic Robert Gardner (Forests of Bliss) to the anti-ethnographic ethnographer Trinh T. Minh-ha, and 3) the occidental tourists, "personal visions" of "auteurs on tour" from Michael Rubbo to Louis Malle and Werner Schroeter, claiming as their ancestors Renoir,

Pasolini and Rossellini. However progressive and useful these three groups of independents may sometimes be, they can't help being part of the unequal flow of images from North to South. Somehow Euro-American mediators still seem to be the required filters for images of our Third World Other.

The situation with India is a case in point. Despite the current Northern boom in interest in the Indian cinema — in particular a long overdue scrutiny of Indian popular cinema in such periodicals as Screen, Framework, Continuum and Quarterly Review of Film Studies — independent documentary film and video from that country are unjustly neglected. This dynamic counter-cinema is in effect a domestic third cinema, a small but effective irritant in the flank of the ele-

phantine first cinema, the crisis-prone Bombay-Madras industry, and the anemic second cinema, the prestigious state-sub-sidized art cinema that still monopolizes our attention in Western festivals and even in progressive periodicals like *Framework*.

1. The awkward expression "Third (World) Cinema(s)" is used in this essay to avoid the fruitless semantic quibble between "third world cinema" and "third cinema", both terms having certain usefulness despite their imprecision and the cultural decontextualization they both usually imply. Other terms expressing versions of the traditional cultural and political dichotomies, such as the UNESCOpreferred "North" and "South", will also enter my discussion, sometimes where appropriate, sometimes according to whim, and sometimes well ensconced in quotation marks, as a reminder of the still provisional status of the terminology in this rapidly shifting interdisciplinary field. As the dust is still settling, scholars must be all the more vigilant in establishing contexts and distinctions and avoiding the idealizations rampant in the territory, without at the same time entirely immobilizing descriptive and generalizing possibilities. Looking at national third (world) "cinemas", one must insist on the local vertical gradations of the entertainment industries, the statesponsored "art/auteur" cinemas, and the "third" oppositional cinemas; at the same time this must be balanced by a perspective of structural and political analogies between Rio and Bombay, Ecuador and Senegal, ICAIC and the Shanghai Film Studio, Montreal's Alanis Obamsawin and Manila's Nick DeoCampo, and this can surely be done without mystifying obvious cultural and political particularities of each context. Even cross-cultural auteur canons have their place, if only because the marketplace in which we all have to work is most responsive to them, though we can surely do better than Willemen's masculinizing pantheon of "masters" in Questions of Third World Cinema. As for the critical neglect of Third (World) documentary, Julianne Burton's new anthology on The Social Documentary in Latin America, which I haven't yet seen at press time, promises to fill in some of the gaps, taking over from the seven articles in my own anthology Show Us Life which previously seemed to be the most systematic tour of the field.

This neglect is not only the result of careful orchestration on the part of the Indian state cultural bureaucracy, but unfortunately a reflection of Northern taste. Somehow Indian documentary seems less translatable than the exotic mysteries of Indian auteur fiction for First World audiences - at least for influential festival programmers, especially North American. With its frequent availability in domestically circulated English versions and despite its use of a largely familiar documentary vocabulary, this impermeability of taste is paradoxical to say the least. The cultural untranslatability of Indian documentary is perhaps because of (not despite) its familiar vocabulary. By this I mean that Indian documentary inherits the same dread Griersonian legacy as our own. Its insistently "realist" mode, increasingly discredited in the North (even without the authoritative voice-overs that Indian practitioners are maintaining, for reasons I will elaborate later), rings just a little too close for comfort and is not quite either inscrutable or glitzy enough for our jaded postmodern and orientalist tastes.

The Griersonian legacy in India is heavy indeed: the Films Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was modelled after a colonial institution developed during the War - at the same time and with the same mission as our own NFB. The Films Division held a virtual monopoly on the documentary film in India during the first four decades of Independence, fattened by a regimen of omnipresent and compulsory (but little heeded) theatrical screenings.2 Only in the 1980s has its paralyzing grip - aesthetic, political, and economic - been eroded by upstart independents and television documentarists (once again the analogies with the Canadian situation are chilling!). The Films Division has ensured at least one consensus among its independent successors, and this in terms of audience practice: Films Division fare has been so universally hated that commercial theatres are the last place anyone will ever want to show a documentary! Instead richly diverse and resourceful distribution strategies are being built up, based on settings as different as rural educational networks, improvised urban slum screenings, hand-to-hand videotape circulation and specialized or elite networks within the labour or civil liberties movements. Some films have even made it onto Doordarshan, the national TV network - not without occasional litigation to pry open the airwaves.

Otherwise, after scarcely a decade of work, it is too soon for a distinct Indian national school or style of documentary to have emerged — even if a homogeneous school were likely or desirable in the face of proud regional autonomies. Still, for all the variation in technique and cultural positioning among the young independents, there are certain commonalities beyond the inherited baggage of Films Divisions formats that they all have simultaneously clung to and cast off. Something is to be learned from looking at certain corners of this work as a corpus and thinking about how the idiom of direct cinema is being inflected by the cultural, political and economic imperatives of a postcolonial society.

One major inflection of direct cinema is apparent as soon

as a generic inventory of the films in question is undertaken, namely the conspicuous absence of important Euro-American documentary genres. Both the compilation-interview genre (de Antonio) and pure observational documentary (Wiseman) are very minor traditions indeed (the limited development of the 16mm infrastructure is an obvious material factor here). At most, observational and compilation work are occasional components of a hybrid vocabulary (significantly, two women's films that use observational strategies, Mira Nair's India Cabaret and Nilita Vachani's new Eyes of Stone, were directed by individuals trained or residing abroad and shot by Northern cinematographers). As for autobiographical, experimental or otherwise self-reflexive strands, these are almost nonexistent in India. Virtually the only exception is Mani Kaul, state-funded author of Siddheshwari, Indian cinema's most visible presence on the major international art cinema festival circuit this year (a first for documentary); however, Kaul's astonishing oeuvre can be explained in part by the fact that his ethno-musicological orientation falls within the Films Division's cultural vocation.

A far cry from Kaul's formally challenging exploration of traditional cultural forms, the didactic social documentary, the most favored genre of the Indian independents, is in some ways a look-alike of its institutionalized Northern counterpart, and no less unquestioning of its "realist" stance. Anchored in the interventionist mode of direct cinema consolidated in the North in the early seventies by the New Left and the Women's Movement, it deploys a similar mode of collaborative low-ratio mise-en-scene, and relies heavily on interviewing. This formula is nurtured by an oppositional political context and marginal economic basis not dissimilar to that in the North. However, what is specific and distinctive to the Indians within this general model are certain variations in direct cinema vocabulary and structure on a microcosmic level. These variations, related no doubt to the generic pattern observed above, are largely cultural, one suspects, but have distinct political ramifications.

TALKING GROUPS

The ensemble of these Indian variations in the direct cinema lexicon crystallize, I would argue, in the trope that might be called the "collective interview" or the "talking group". Though this trope is not statistically overwhelming, it is specific to and symbolically representative of the independent documentary current, as I will attempt to demonstrate through referring to three representative films made in the 1980s by different directors in various regions of India: Voices From Baliapal, The Sacrifice of Babulal Bhurya, and Bombay Our City (see text box).

In the key scenes described below, as in several more like them in each film, everyone is often talking at once. The speakers' address is direct, aimed at the filmmaker who is standing or seated beside the camera (in fact the director is operating it in the case of *Voices*). The voices are fast and emotional, in unison, overlapping, yielding to each other and taking turns, or interrupting, seconding or disagreeing with each

Barnauw and Krishnaswamy's account of this contradictory and anomalous situation is the most accessible of several (1980).



Figure 1

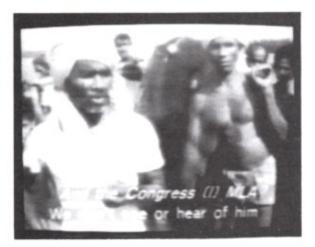


Figure 2

VOICES FROM BALIAPAL

Ranjan Palit and Vasudha Joshi, 1989.

Peasants and fishing people in a fertile region of Orissa State on the Bay of Bengal resist expropriation of their lands by the government for a missile base. In the two minute scene evoked by this still (Figure 1), women demonstrators talk together to the camera about their refusal to leave their ancestral land. In the five shots that make up this scene, a hand-held camera keeps the tight frame full of the faces of the women as they speak one by one, following the wandering, back-and-forth thread of the conversation.

Our committee has instructed us to raise an alarm with conches and thalis (metal food trays). Then we go and block the road. If the men are out, women lie down in front of vehicles.

Who has brought the women forward today? The Government. Their land is also ours. How will we leave our Mother? How will we leave? They have everything, let them kill us. Why should we wander from place to place? They will turn us into beggars. Let them see who is more powerful.

We'll lie down in front of their vehicles. We'll die. That's all we can do.

What knowledge do we have? They have everything. They have weapons — We have thalis which we bang, to call people out, to find courage together.

With our kids in our arms, We'll stand and die. If we die alone the kids will suffer. They'll have to kill us and the kids.

Elsewhere in the film groups of fishermen are set within a similar construction (Figure 2), expressing to a hovering camera their protest and defiance.

other. There are also natural pauses and moments of silence. The camera is mobile without being flamboyant, moving from medium to close range and back, either fluidly mounted or tightly hand-held. Together with the microphone, the apparatus has a finely tuned sensitivity to the shifting organic equilibrium of individual and collective voice. The pro-filmic event is set up in collaboration between subjects and filmmaker, either at their advance suggestion or his/hers, or else, if more spontaneously, still based on a prior relationship and an instinctively agreed-upon format of the group interview/declaration. Trigger questions are sometimes retained by the editor, but seem hardly necessary.

One of the fascinating revelations of the "talking group" is

the social functioning and constitution of the group. Roles within a group are usually understood and prescribed through an unspoken consensus (or, sometimes, a *spoken* consensus signalled by a "You tell it!" from offscreen, or else triggered by the filmmaker's "Let Mother speak"). This process in which a spokesperson is designated to express a collective will, whether spontaneously or through deliberation, is of course dependent on which preconstituted group entity is present. In *Bombay* the scene I have described involves a large extended family, who are introduced one by one by the materfamilias and who provide the paternal grandmother with honorary space for her commentary. In other examples, the group is an occupational or economic community (the

Baliapal fishermen, Figure 4), whose shared but unspoken pride in their catch and their tools bolsters their rhetoric of solidarity and defiance. Or else the group is composed of victims of a shared calamity, as in two Indian documentaries about the Bhopal industrial catastrophe, in which case panic and grief are closer to the surface, making consensus both easier and more difficult than with a preconstituted occupational or gender group.

The "talking group" trope arises from a society where the group rather than the individual is the primary site of political discourse and of cultural expression. Or, as in Raymond Williams' classic formulation in a somewhat different context, a society that is

the positive means for all kinds of development, including individual development. Development and advantage are not individually but commonly interpreted. The provision of the means of life will, alike in production and distribution, be collective and mutual. Improvement is sought, not in the opportunity to escape from one's class, or to make a career, but in the general and controlled advance of all. The human fund is regarded as in all respects common, and freedom of access to it as a right constituted by one's humanity; yet such access, in whatever kind, is common or it is nothing. Not the individual, but the whole society, will move. (1958, 326)

A social actor's identity is defined by her/his relation to a group, rather than through a distinctive individual psy-

Figure 3



THE SACRIFICE OF BABULAL BHUIYA Manijra Datta, 1989

A community of poor coal-dust (slurry) salvagers at the bottom end of an industrial economy in Bihar state resist harassment by police and local bosses, and offer sometimes conflicting reminiscences of a fellow salvager who has been enshrined as a martyr to the Cause. In the one-take, two-minute scene evoked by this still (Figure 3), a half-dozen women are seated in a communal village space under a tree, captured by a close panning camera mounted on a low tripod inside a group of houses, and discuss their memory of the titular hero's death with the filmmaker.

Filmmaker: Does the CISF (Central Industrial Security Force) intimidate women here?

They still do.

Filmmaker: Poonamji, you tell us.

Yes, even now the sepoys pester women.

They're covering up.

In Damadar colliery we heard that Babulal's sister was being pestered. He couldn't bear that so the fight developed. If not why did the fight start? Just tell us that. Why did it start? Why did the murder happen?

Only a witness can say what happened. They wouldn't let us take out slurry or light a kiln. They wanted protection money. So they picked a fight. All we know is work. The boss and the accountant will give the money (to the racketeers), not us? why should we?

Filmmaker: Let Basenti tell us what happened that day.

Why was it that Babulal was killed that day? It was reported in the colliery that the CISF had abused Babulal's sister. Probably he was working, digging at the time, — but he say what was happening to his sister. The CISF men used dirty language to her. A fight developed.



Figure 4

chology. His/her first allegiance is not to the self or the state, but to the immediate community, on whom rests the responsibility for responding collectively to an outside threat and for working out a solution.

A number of theorists of Third (World) Cinema(s) have elaborated on a cinematic articulation of group society in fiction. Teshome Gabriel locates it in the integration of the individual and the social manifest in

- the constitution of the subject which is radically different from a Western conception of the individual;
- 2. the non-hierarchical order, which is differential rather than autonomous;
- 3. the emphasis on collective social space rather than on transcendental individual space. (1989, 59)

Burton refers to "more integrative interactional concept of being-in-the-world" proper to Third World societies (1985, 17). She goes an to describe Jorge Sanjines' encounter with Andean villagers who refused to let a communal spokesperson appear alone in the filmmaker's frame during the 1969 shooting of *Blood of the Condor*; thus emerged the concept of the collective hero in Sanjines' subsequent work, where he eschewed *Condor*'s one-shot web of shot-countershot and reaction closeups, as well as its climactic rhythm of suspense and dénouement. Burton also mentions the work of Ousmane

BOMBAY OUR CITY

Anand Patwardhan, 1985

The shelter crisis within an urban megalopolis. Slum dwellers and squatters resist eviction. A matriarch and her family, assembled in front of their erstwhile hut as it is being rebuilt, articulate their experience and determination. In the five shots of this three minute scene (Figure 4), the woman and her mother-in-law, their voices bolstered by other family members, describe their situation and articulate their defiance to the crew. A hand-held camera moves back and forth between the speakers and the objects of their remarks.

Woman Garbage-picker: We work in the garbage dump. I collect hair and make wigs to sell. There was nothing in the village so we came here. If they throw us out now, where can me go? I told them 'Break whatever you want. I'll just spread my sari and form a shelter. You'll be wasting your own time.' That's my younger brother, that's my mother-in-law, my three children, my nephew, and my husband's brother, who's ill. (Mother-in-law, speaking Tamil in contrast to her daughter-in-law's adopted Hindi, interjects a comment, not translated by the subtitles). She says that if we had our own place at least we could die in peace instead of drying up in the sun.

Filmmaker: Speak on, Mother.

Mother-in-law: They come again and again and take everything away.

Filmmaker: You're rebuilding at the same site?

Woman: Yes, there's no choice.

Filmmaker: Won't they demolish again?

Woman: Let them . We have no alternative. It costs us one rupee for a bucket of water. My husband earns Rs 10 a day and we have a whole family to feed. We need water to drink, bathe, wash clothes — we need soap, oil. On top, the Municipality is after us, and the people here are all cowards. When the authorities come, they run. I'm left standing alone. No one dares speak up. They just run. If we stood together and fought — we could get something. But they start complaining — only after the authorities have left. In front of them no one speaks. You can't fight alone. So yesterday I also sat. My things were destroyed like everyone else's.

A NOTE ON AUTHORSHIP

All three of the very different films by different directors used as examples in this article were photographed at least in part by Bengali cinematographer Ranjan Palit. A graduate of the Film and Television Institute of India, and a member, it goes without saying, of India's middle-class English-speaking elite, Palit is sensitive, consciously or unconsciously, to the cultural determinations of speech and the cultural politics of collective life. Palit's talent for fitting easily into group situations which may be otherwise guarded about outsiders is clear. Eschewing the zoom and usually holding the camera, he shoots in close proximity to his subjects, responding physically to the flow and meaning of the conversation. He seems to sense instinctively how the camera wields power, and how to dissipate and share that power. Others do not have his priorities, witness the relative scarcity of the talking group formations from an otherwise excellent body of work by the prizewinning independent team Suhasini Mulay and Tapan Bose. Their films such as Bhopol: Beyond Genocide or An Indian Story, fierce denunciations of the corruption and violence of power, abound in spatial articulations of the individual speech of the bureaucrat, and, symptomatically, in an occasionally overwritten voice-over commentary, but only rarely provide space for the genius of group speech.

Sembene, but interestingly both the Bolivian and the Senegalese directors work in dramatic fiction (in the usual sense), rather than documentary. Furthermore films such as Emitai and Blood of the Condor rely extensively on non-verbal communication rather than verbal dialogue within their narrative structures, with the imperatives of working with nonprofessional actors on location apparently prevailing over the potential benefits of oral culture. Sanjines' more recent work, such as Fuera Aqui! (1977), based for the first time on extensive use of direct lip-sync dialogue by non-professional performers re-enacting collective struggles, offers a fascinating approximation of documentary group speech all the while maintaining the syntax of "don't-look-at-the-camera" narrative. Here fluid sequence shots facilitate a privileged audiovisual inscription of communal process that is quite unique in cinematic fiction, unforgettable for its vivid mosaic of excited voices and babies' cries from a culture too often represented by impassive silent faces and aestheticized flute scores. With documentary it is a different story: the group image recurs trans-culturally throughout the Third World, wherever traditional societies resisting the dehumanization of "modernization" and "development" address the direct-sound documentary camera, not Sanjines' or Ousmane's silent groups, but groups that talk.

In Indian documentary, articulations of the "talking

group" often revolve around the private/public spatial dimensions of the individual/collective dichotomy that Gabriel points to. For one thing, there are few interiors in Indian documentary. This is partly due to climate and technology — the small, dark but cool, living spaces of the poor are often unwired, though Datta managed a few inside shots, using available light through the door of the hut in question. (A more famous poet of doorways and available light, Trihn T. Minh-ha enters the West African dwellings of Naked Space — Living is Round to construct a sense of dwellings as dim and mysterious social corridors, Datta does so to get away from the police!).

In the talking group convention, allowing oneself to be filmed is not a private affair, but a participation in collective speech, in group identification and affirmation. As such, being filmed takes place in public space. Talking groups are often shot in community meeting places, in Sacrifice almost ritualistically under a beneficent community shade tree. Or, very commonly, the setup is in semi-public courtyard space in front of dwellings, that space where food is prepared, where sleeping cots are moved in the hot weather. In Bombay, interestingly, even when the dwelling is demolished by municipal bulldozers, the semi-public courtyard space continues to exist, and the talking group is filmed there, the matriarch fully in control of this her continuing domain. Otherwise communal working space is featured, as on the beach at Baliapal: here the busy backdrop of sea, equipment and catchconstitutes a cinematic arena for the subjects' proud declarations. Thus this film about the defense of space integrates the talking group into a cinematic articulation of subject-controlled space.

One of the most common mis(pre-)conceptions about documentary filming in India, is that you can't shoot in public spaces, because of the camera being jostled by the crowd, the crew threatened by mobs, the lens invaded by grandstanding street urchins. Many of the independents have shown this to be utter nonsense. Several films in my corpus take to the streets or factories, even where filming is forbidden and must be through subterfuge, whereupon the lack of control of social space becomes the filmic and pro-filmic issue. The taboo on street shooting is a culture-centric conception that denies the genius of group culture and of collective social life, assuming Northern/bourgeois standards of individualized speech and the fetishized one-shot subject.

ORAL CULTURE

The concept of oral culture may be all too often the idealized focus of alienated political nostalgia, but it still provides the necessary and concrete framework for looking at the Indian documentaries. Cultural articulations of space and time that are specific to pre-industrial or "modernizing" societies come inexorably to the surface in collective speech; this may well be the material of the elusive third world chronotype that has been the target of theorists such as Gabriel (though he oddly doesn't pursue it with regard to documentary, a rather obvious place to begin because of documentary's aspiration to record "real" time and space). All of the sample Indian films I

have selected are structured by these dynamics of oral culture, crystallizing in the trope of the "talking group" rather than, say, in the isolated and sentimentalized storyteller of a film like Sugar Cane Alley. In particular, Sacrifice can be said to be specifically about oral culture as well. Different memories of the eponymous martyr and absent hero come out of different segments of the community (women and men, the union and Communist Party officials), each with its own agenda for a mythographic oral construction of the remembered sacrifice. These memories are communicated, embellished, confirmed and fused through group speech. The film is a spectacular demonstration of how the processes of oral culture create a catalytic dialectical tension among different groups and enter into community consolidation and problem-solving. Group speech operates on a collective scale with a transformative power that is analogous to that of the individual subject's access to language in the psychoanalytic process. In the "talking group" scenes of Sacrifice and the other Indian films, the camerawork, movement and composition, as well as the cutting, match the slow give-and-take of group speech. The camera pans back and forth over the group, following the dynamic of individual speakers chiming in to reinforce each other, pausing to give someone else the authority to speak, or whatever. The process involves the choruses and refrains, repetition and cadences of group discussion (and incidentally of other time-based artforms from music to theatre). The overall pattern of shot length, sequence structure and editing metre often replicates the slow but inexorable group process: the first confrontation with the crisis is followed by repeated interrogative rhetoric in the first person plural ("How can we leave (the Earth) our Mother?"), followed by the slowly cemented communal resolution, an affirmation still in the first person plural ("If we stood together and fought, we could get something.") In the sentences at the head of this article, Frantz Fanon detailed a similar evolution of rhetorical modes - from lament to indictment, and then from appeal to command — undergone by the Third World subject as he or she moves from isolation from the people to alignment with the people (though of course Fanon's specific concern is the intellectual and artist, rather than the slum dwellers or fishermen who appear in these films). (Fanon 1968, 239) The process is not easy and the "talking group" tropes reveal the need for continual repetition and confirmation at each stage. One wonders to what extent culture-centric criteria entered into the rejection of Voices From Baliapal, an Indian National Prizewinner, by an efficient Oberhausen Festival selection committee on the grounds of its "repetitiveness".3

For the historian of the documentary, there is much that is recognizable in the Indian independent films of the 1980s. They are reminiscent of a generation of Northern documentary, starting thirty years ago, when direct-sound language burst out of the shell of the classical silent (voice-over) documentary. Thanks to a Nagra or a blimp, the silenced subject

became suddenly empowered with the gift of speech. In such currents as Quebec direct cinema, U.S. Newsreel's vérité works with urban African-Americans or blue collar white workers, or women's documentary during the consciousnessraising phase, one recognizes a similar eagerness of the disenfranchised to speak out. Though the oral-culture-as-liberation method periodically gets re-energized, as in such recent packets of renewal as AIDS activist video in North America, or in the documentary stream of the new black British cinema and video, in general it fell increasingly into disrepute in the North in the late 1970s and 1980s: the method seemed no less subject than any other to short cuts and standardization, abuses, manipulations, and excesses. "Talking heads" became, often unfairly, a cliché and synonym for an aesthetic rut of static framing and visual monotony; the ideal of "letting people speak", "donner la parole" became matter for parody (such as in Claudia Weill's denigration of documentary in the recent Canadian "talking heads" feature documentary Calling the Shots as the activity of following people around all day trying to get them to say what you want to say). For Bill Nichols, the interview film became a structure in which the authorial voice was disguised or abdicated, or both, in which the filmmaker became a ventriloquist hiding behind carefully selected charismatic subjects. (1985)

Such criticism of the abuses of a method, however valid, hardly negates its undeniable and continuing achievements. For example, a filmmaker like Sophie Bissonnette, achieves through scrupulous research and conscientious consent protocols a workable negotiation of ethical and political accountability. An author's voice can encounter in authentic ways and perhaps even merge with the (collective) voices of subjects. In Bissonnette's Duel Numero What Number?, comic skits are presented by her telephone operator subjects to show their working conditions. These skits constitute a fascinating performative variant of the "talking group" process, while another "singing group" scene has an infectious ebullience: documentary brings musical production number onto the supermarket floor! Ultimately, Nichols' ideal of self-reflexivity may be a timely summons to an authorial accountability to subjects and audiences, but is it not also a culturally-bound aesthetic articulating an individualist ideology of the fetishized authorial self? In this sense, are not Trinh's collage multi-layered voice-over soundtracks for her two West African films, for all their unsettling originality in their use of wild sound and commentary, simply new refinements in a culture-centric silencing of the (post)colonial subject? No wonder such tactics are absent in India and elsewhere in the Third World. Inflected by cultures where traditional orality is still wrestling with the weight of print and media technology, the 1960s gospel of emancipatory speech has resurfaced in a collective idiom. Functioning as a kind of cultural empowerment with a wide range of political ramifications, the Indian direct cinema matches the first-person-plural of its subjects' dialogue with a model of first-person-plural cinematic dis-

The overall picture of direct cinema has always been complicated by the logistic problems raised by the recording and circulation of direct speech in multi-linguistic contexts, and it is all the more problematical in the semi-literate multi-linguis-

^{3.} Another German festival, Mannheim, has made up in 1990 for this lapse by awarding a prize to Anand Patwardhon's new In Memory of Friends, a work on the Punjab crisis which true to form includes a requisite number of 'talking group' scenes.

tic political entities of the Third World. It is no doubt this particular issue that has forced fiction filmmakers from Sembene to Sanjines to channel their narrative vision through modes of non-verbal communication, from gesture and dance to percussion and song, rather than through classical dialogue, and this in cultures where the presence of griots, shamans and folk poets still flourish. (In Emitai and Blood of the Condor, interestingly enough, the most dialogue-heavy sections present groups discredited by the filmmaker, respectively Sembene's immobilized elders and conscripted colonial troops and Sanjines' Peace Corps imperialists speaking missionary Spanish. Significantly, when Trinh scrutinizes the same multi-linguistic geographic region as Sembene, she comes up with the documentary equivalent of Sembene's and Sanjines' non-verbal language: her tropes of architecture, music and dance crowd out the culture of speech.)

Coming back to multi-lingual India, the traditional topdown solution imposed by the federal state's documentary aesthetic was the voice-of-God narration. Easily dubbed in the seventeen or so official state languages, this device had the welcome additional political advantage for Bombay-Delhi bureaucrats of the full discursive control inherent in one-way top-down communication. The Films Division never liked direct cinema. Aside from the problem of the exorbitant costs of the high-ratio shooting intrinsic to the direct method, as well as the inadaptability of the existing 35mm infrastructure, people never said what they were supposed to say. In the most famous case, a 1968 birth control film by O.P. Arora called Actual Experience was made in a direct-cinema idiom that was briefly in vogue by a few Films Divisions directors looking North. The film's purpose was to promote IUDS, but the women speaking in the often stiff interviews all complained about problems and side-effects from the device, thus effectively torpedoing the project's goal and causing considerable embarrassment.

Independent documentarists' choice of a direct cinema method does incur a linguistic disadvantage when shown outside of its linguistic territory, regardless of whether the chosen means of translation is subtitling, dubbing or, more likely, the improvised solution of live contextual interpreting (in which the live translator enters into the pluri-vocality of the communications system). But the disadvantage of translation is outweighed by clear political benefits: in addition to the democratic potential of multiple-directional communication, direct cinema counters the centralizing and bureaucratic effect of the Films Division voice-over with the programme of regional cultural autonomy symbolized by the state languages and their countless dialects.

A NOTE ON GENDER

Gender also enters this picture (as it always does), both behind and in front of the camera. It may be no accident that all three of my representative films privilege women as social actors: not content with the codes of silent suffering that are omnipresent elsewhere in Third (World) Cinema(s), all present groups of women responding with authority to the crisis and articulating courses of action. (It is no accident either that a woman director and co-director are responsible for Sacrifice and Voices respectively, nor that women are highly visible behind the camera across the entire sector of independent Indian documentary, regardless of whether a film is about "women's issues."). In any case the high visibility of women confirms their unchallenged and respected role as purveyors of oral culture, and as wielders of matriarchal power, at least within domestic or semi-public space, or within homo-social public space. An exceptional "talking group" shot in yet another film, Bhopol: A Licence to Kill?, has great symbolic impart when a woman subject crosses over in front of male speakers to appropriate the microphone and the frame, and to transgress the clearly defined demarcations of women's public territory.

Similar patterns of authorship and subject emerged when I re-screened a dozen or so Northern ethnographic films on Third World subjects as a kind of control group, wondering whether traditional cultures sometimes impose the "talking group" trope on Northern documentarists as a matter of course. I was not surprised that only a very few of the films included "talking group" scenes, and these - disappointingly short for all their memorable impact - suggested that Northern ethnographers rarely catch on to the apparatus's potential sensitivity to the social structure of speech in their subject societies, to the importance of how things are said in addition to what. Significantly most of these scenes involved women subjects and seem to have been constructed by women directors or co-directors. One need not ascribe to crude gender essentialism in order to pinpoint the interface of social gender and documentary style in both North and South as a subject for urgent further research.

CAMERA CULTURE

The presence of the "talking group" engages, it goes without saying, a whole complex of cultural attitudes to the camera in the host community, including larger cultural attitudes to representation and self-representation itself. For example, when the peasant and working class subjects of the Indian independents are isolated in closeup, they are usually awkward and inarticulate (unlike their Euro-American counterparts whom a skilled director can often get to blurt out their deepest feelings). But an Indian group confronting a camera is overtaken by a dynamic energy and an inspired gift of speech, even a pride in facing the camera together. At the same time, formal demonstration scenes, a staple of contestatory cinema in both North and South, are sometimes much stiffer in India, when participants become self-conscious about prescribed behaviours like unison chanting and synchronized gestures that contradict deeper-rooted and improvisatory group conventions.

The codes of group discourse in the face of the documentary camera, as in the public arena in general, constitute a basic mechanism for a community to effectively control its own representation: this is the reason why the Indian films almost never reveal the clowning and grandstanding that characterize group scenes in the North (except perhaps by curious children) and one reason (other than the obvious

material one) why the Northern code of observational vérite has had a hard time establishing itself. The observational camera provokes a palpable tension as the codes of a public face and prescribed roles of group discourse itch to take over from the unfamiliar, illusion-based discourse of "acting natural" and "don't look at the camera".

It might be assumed that the issues explored above simply arise within any culture at what Susan Sontag calls the "early stages of camera culture". Yet Sontag's analysis of Chinese attitudes to photographic representation is as Eurocentric as it is incomplete, speaking of the "characteristic visual taste of those at the first stage of camera culture, when the image is defined as something that can be stolen from its owner."(Sontag 1978, 171) As an explanation for the Chinese disinclination to capture motion or unguarded moments on film, their compulsion to pose, "camera culture" needs further consideration. For one thing, the metaphorical belief in the danger of having your image stolen is not limited to exotic primitives: judging from the evidence of the camera-shy disenfranchised and homeless crowding in on Sontag's Manhattan backyard or the Montreal police caught without name tags as they bash Mohawks or lesbians and gays, or the uptight Public Relations official at the closing plant in Roger and Me - the belief in the symbolic soul-stealing power of the camera would seem to be no less widespread in Sontag's own culture. To put things differently, what is at stake, whether for Chinese and Indian social actors (or for our Victorian ancestors having their portrait taken), is not a superstition that the soul is stolen by the camera, but the instinctive assumption of the right to reveal one's soul on one's own terms in controlled address of the camera. The impulse to "pose", to control one's photographic representation including the Northern post-Kodak "posing" of spontaneity - seems cross-cultural to say the very least. Working class subjects usually understand, when caught in a group, that the camera wields political power and expresses economic and cultural difference, and that it must be confronted with group solidarity and control over the pose: one of Patwardhan's subjects challenges him in exactly these terms, accusing him in effect of being a poverty tourist. Similarly, in both North and South, poor and powerless groups often identify even the most ragtag camera unit as a network TV crew and consequently as an arbiter of power, either a source of redress to be petitioned or an invasive menace to be chased away. The grandstanding phenomenon in the North, teenyboppers grimacing, waving, or preening into the lens, often involves the powerless and anonymous "performing" power and individuality to the camera, petitioning the camera to confer identity on the alienated self. Caught up in the desperate postmodern cult of spontaneity and acting out the tired inheritance of Romantic individualism, our camera culture seems at a rather primitive stage itself.

TALKING HEADS

Is it possible to speculate about how our own social and cultural formation have inflected documentary discourse in the North? If the trope of the "talking group" has a counterpart in Euro-American documentary, it is surely the solitary interview, the "talking head". If our "talking head" is also reflective of social organization, it is surely that organization Williams called "bourgeois":

"an idea of society as a neutral area within which each individual is free to pursue his own development and his own advantage as a natural right." (Williams, 325)

The long-take intimate closeup declarations of subjects in direct-cinema works from Golden Gloves to Roger and Me, from Chronique d'un Été to Shoah, are symptomatic of a social ideology organized around the individual, and, what is more, a religio-cultural tradition based on the confession. Politics is privatized and internalized, the self is fetishized and dramatized. The individual confronts trauma first and foremost in isolation. If our "talking head" embodies the culminating point of what Brian Winston has called the Griersonian tradition of the victim (Figure 5, Roger and Me), it is also the key trope of the hybrid interview format pioneered by Emile de Antonio. In this format, the "talking head" belongs more often than not to an expert and hence becomes not confessional in its function, but sacerdotal, administering the sacrament of absolution to the conscience of the audience, bestowing the authority of scripture on the word of the author. (Figure 6, a sacerdotal expert witness, Margaret Laurence, in Speaking Our

Groups are often seen but not heard in Northern documentary. Most often and typically the group appears a) in long shot, and/or b) silent, spied upon, or otherwise disenfranchised. If heard, groups are often constructed through the common newsgathering format of the crowd on the street, talking into a rotating, director-controlled microphone about something trivial ("How do you feel about the Expos' chances?") or, if about something serious, in the desired monosyllabic "sound-bites", that tend to sentimentalize ("Did you all lose everything in the hurricane?") or ridicule ("What are the cultural advantages in Flint Michigan?" (Figure 7, Roger and Me).

The exceptions prove the rule: Frederick Wiseman's preservation of communal institutional space throughout his oeuvre usually serves to accentuate the individual's alienated place within the unit, and that environment's inherent dynamics of competition, miscommunication, repression, victimization or frustration. (Interestingly, the cameramen responsible for the extra tight, decontextualizing closeups of Wiseman's first two films *Titicut Follies* (1967) and *High School* (1968) were quickly dropped from the director's crew before his habitual cameraman, William Brayne, with an eye for the individual's surroundings, came on board.)

An important further exception can be located in the radical documentary where the project of collective enfranchisement is consciously applied to cinematographic practice, most notably and consistently in women's documentary. Here, as has been noted by Julia Lesage, the principle of the consciousness-raising group is translated into documentary structure. But even in the films where this works best, as in Joanne Elam's Rape, the group affiliation seems to lack an organic basis, or at least the group formation is the precarious work of the film rather than its premise, that is, constructed through, rather than "revealed by", the cinematic process (literally through the visionary device of passing the camera around the circle). The end result differs sharply from the "talking group" trope in that there is no direct address of the camera and the artificial rules of observational illusion are maintained. (This is not to mention Rape's protocol of processed video image necessary to preserve anonymity for the speakers, a protocol which incidentally never occurs to Northerners shooting in the South). In general, whatever group sensibility is affirmed in Euro-American documentary is often all too tenuous, even in women's and left cinema, with directors ever ready to vank a subject out of the collective context and to crank in for some closeup "talking head" intimacy (Lesage 1984).

Another interesting Northern experiment with talking groups is Godard/Gorin's perversely memorable sequence in *British Sounds*(1969): a group discussion by unionized auto workers about capitalism and piece-work is monitored by a mobile camera which in fact alights its one-shot frame everywhere around the group except on the speaker whose voice is carried by the lip-sync sound-track. Godard is self-reflexively deconstructing the whole institution of sync-sound, and the alienated relationship of the individual one-shot to the group voice is interrogated in the process. Who cares if the content of the discussion is lost in the process? Elsewhere in the film, the one scene where a syntax of direct-sound group speech is respected, the scene where the militant students are dreaming up alternative revolutionary lyrics to Beatles' songs, is a cunning sendup.

The clash between the cultural foundation of "talking head" and "talking group" becomes symptomatically visible when Northern cinematographers look at the Third World. One of the three Indian directors mentioned above told me about his/her tour of the NFB where s/he had been shown rushes shot by an eminent Canadian cinematographer for a film on popular music in a Third World society. Various scenes had unfolded before the camera according to the "talking group" structure, but the rushes revealed that the Canadian cinematographer had consistently and unwittingly singled out speaking individuals within the frame, thereby distorting the social weave of the pro-filmic event.

India Cabaret offers an even more dramatic example, with the hybrid Northernized perspective of its emigrant director and American cameraman cemented through the mechanics of the shot and the structure of the film as a whole. The collective social images of the professional group of women cabaret dancers are the centrepiece of the film, but this primary group identification is repeatedly wrenched apart as a narrative impulse zeroes in on individual "characters" - now on Rekha's life-changing decision to leave the group through marriage (an apparently atypical dénouement for group members) and now on Rosy's staged return to her distant, long-abandoned and still unforgiving family. Interestingly, these shifts from the social grouping of the workplace to the obsolete affiliation with the (oddly occidental) nuclear family are replicated with the male customer group of the film. From this collective grouping of leering and jovial customers as



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

well, the filmmakers separate a likely candidate and drive him home to his wife, driving home the vivid though somewhat facile theme of private family ideology contradicting public sexual entertainment.

One wonders to what extent Northern ethnographers filming pre-industrial or "modernizing" cultures are guilty of similar impositions on their subject communities through the unwitting deployment of individualized cinematic syntaxes. I have already referred to my random group of direct-sound ethnographic films from the seventies and eighties, examined as a control sample, exploring from an outsider's objective and scientific perspective cultural formations within societies from Amazonia to West Africa; of these only a few showed scenes approaching the structure of the "talking group", though most employed observational vérite' and "talking head" interviews. The few films that did incorporate the "talking group" did so only in incidental fragments, which predictably stood out with great vividness and authenticity from the continuum of the films. Granada TV's Asante Market Women (1982) employed the largest number of "talking group" formations, in which speech bubbled up from every corner of the frame (determined, incidentally, by a pecking order that hardly corresponded to Gabriel's non-hierarchical ideal). The filmmakers clearly recognized the special power of a "singing group" scene, for they chose this as a privileged concluding episode in which the market vendors sing their product theme song. In this respect, I find myself wondering what Trinh would have done with sync sound in Reassemblage and Naked Space: Living is Round: would she have had to name-drop Heidegger on the soundtrack had the image fragments of architecture, dance and song been mortared by a fourth layer of speech? Would her long-shot silhouettes lingering in aestheticized space, her idealized vision of pre-lapsarian communities untouched by buses, cigarettes, plastic and Coca-cola have been so prevalent if the sync microphone had been part of her cinematic apparatus?

In the North, as I have intimated, the closeup has a kinship with the ritual of confession, with the filmmaker (or expert witness) as confessor. An individual is isolated and constructed as victim and his/her confession is expressed through the codes of (illusory) intimacy. In India and elsewhere in the South, where religious rituals are collective, not the solitary confession but the group darshan4, the closeup "talking head" is still present but has a specific and different function. Here, the "talking head" is usually a marker of material status rather than of spiritual or ideological role. The one-shot subject is usually shown having control over space, more clearly articulated through greater camera range and frontal compositions than in Northern conventions. A characteristic Indian locale is the chair set out on the lawn, which is perhaps the ultimate marker of privilege with its occupation of unproductive and purely decorative land. Individual control over space is usually synonymous with middle-class authority, and other favorite conventions say it all: the bureaucrat seated behind a distancing desk, or the shopkeeper enthroned idly in front of his wares (both bureaucrat and merchant following the discursive conventions of public spatial power as well as of documentary shorthand). To be sure, one also encounters in Indian documentaries, somewhat atypically, the isolated victim in the Western Griersonian sense (with a Northerntrained filmmaker as often as not behind the camera), but the testimony is usually stiff, unnatural, and unproductive.

Not that "stiff" automatically means "unnatural" and "unproductive", but it is the stiffness of the expressive group that can trigger the eloquence of direct address rather than that of the isolated and bewildered individual trapped in front of the lens. The Films Division's Mani Kaul builds his work brilliantly on the "stiff" performative convention of the musical group, facing the camera as frontally as any talking group, suggesting a commonality between Kaul and his independent compatriots that is not immediately apparent. (Bombay and Baliapal also incorporate performative material in the form of street theatre, but this is usually intra-diegetic rather than facing the camera so that the interaction of performers and audience is preserved). On this side of the North-South divide, another excursion by Godard into the domain of the talking group likewise profits from the uncanny cinematic potential of the highly static, stylized and artificial frontal performance. In Tout Va Bien (1972) a group of strikers' frontally imaged, direct-address songs and slogans are scripted and formal, rather than profiting from the structure of spontaneous collective speech. At the same time Godard has an astute sense of the frame as an index of politics, heightened without a doubt by the stylization: he assigns the boss a talking head, the sellout union bureaucrat a symmetrical three-shot, flunkies behind each shoulder, and the spontaneiste strikers an artfully anarchic and crowded frame, with only the designated spokesperson looking right into the lens. A poignant song spoken by a red-lipped worker to her Monsieur Patron — the lens — has all of the intensity the vérite' games of British Sounds lacked. Curiously these examples of performative tropes seem to anticipate an emerging North American variation of the direct-address "talking group" trope: the rap documentary.

TONGUES UNTIED: LET'S RAP!

Looking at Indian independent filmmakers reminds us not only that cultural variants determine cinematic forms, even within the "international language" of direct cinema, but also that aesthetics and ethics/politics are inseparable in the (documentary) cinema. Bringing these films into circulation within our culture, and analysing their inflections of a cinematic idiom developed in our backyard, is not only a means of reversing the image flow against the grain of neo-imperialism, but also of re-examining how we ourselves speak and are spoken to as documentary practitioners, subjects and consumers.

It is thus not inappropriate to end in this backyard by reflecting on the rap-umentary's resemblance to talking group tropes, both Bodard's performative stylizations and the documentary collective utterances of the Bombay slum dwellers and Bay of Bengal fishermen. Take for example the encouraging recent pair of pedagogically tilted rap performance docu-

literally "seeing", more loosely "unveiling", "revelation" or "presence".

mentaries, Marlon Riggs' video Tongues Untied and Alison Burns' and Patricia Kearns' film Lets Rap! The two works, from San Francisco and Montreal's Studio D of the NFB respectively, derive their astonishing vigour as much from their stylized rendition of the "talking group" as the urgency of their enfranchisement of voices hitherto seldom heard, black gay men and marginal/minority young women. Should it be argued that the performative mode is antipathic to the documentary, it must be countered that the "direct" has always had its foundation in the performative mode of speech. Moreover the stylization of rap may well spark the Euro-American documentary out of its TV-induced coma, in which collective speech has lost its magic communicative and transformative power. We have to learn to speak and listen together again. Should Riggs' and Studio D's "postdocumentary" reliance on dramatization and scripting as a conduit for improvisation, be seen as symptomatic of the global simulacrum where documentary methods and codes of truth value are irrelevant, and where group formations and words of command are meaningless - so be it: there are lots of other rough youthful documentaries out there - North and South, video and film - who haven't heard the news yet either.

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Voices From Baliapal. Ranjan Palit and Vasudha Joshi, India, 1989.

NOTE ON FILM AVAILABILITY

Many of the Indian films cited, as well as other independent Indian documentary films and videotapes, are available on a non-commercial basis for non-profit instructional use from Concordia University's Audio-Visual Department (Attention Ms. E. Justmann, H341, 1455 Boul. de Maisonneuve O., Montréal, Quebec H3G IM8). Bombay Our City is available commercially in Canada from DEC Films and Video, Toronto, and in the U.S. from Icarus Films.

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The Bourgeoisie Is Not My Audience

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN GREYSON

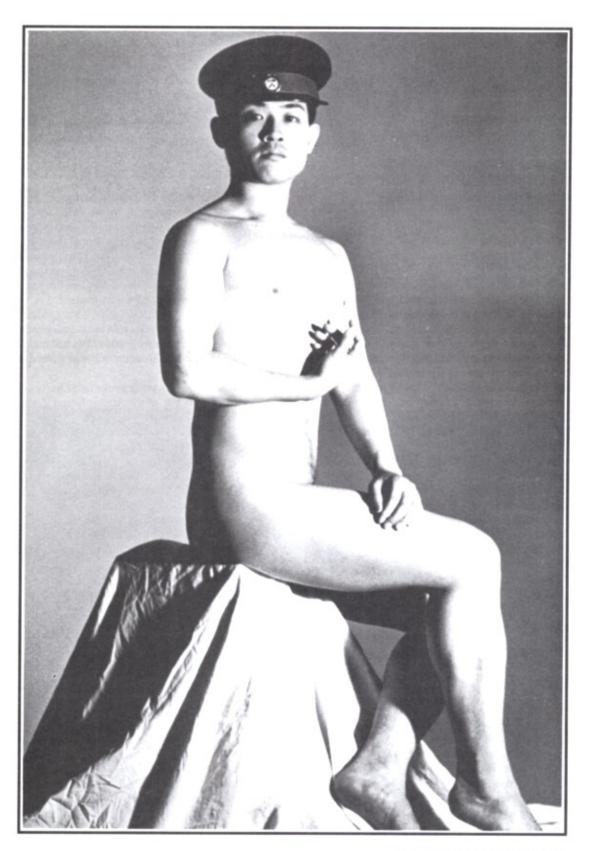
by Peter Steven

"To me, anyone who 'stays true to their vision' at the expense of their subjects is a pig and ends up walking all over people!"

well known video producers in North America. He has worked frenetically on a number of arts and political fronts since 1980, as a producer, curator, promoter for others, writer, distributor, and agitator. His tapes and films centre primarily on gay and lesbian experience but his formal strategies swing wildly between direct cinema documentary and the highly constructed, layered, conventions of Art Video. This interview forms part of a larger study on new film and video documentary in Canada, based partly on interviews with producers. Thus it concentrates on those features of John's work that employ, engage with, and undercut documentary frames and conventions.

Two other aspects of John's work have always intrigued me: the function of comedy and the productive tension between his role as an independent artist and his obvious and specific accountability to political movements. Mainstream criticism usually stumbles over a political artist with a sense of humour, and can barely contemplate art and political responsibility in one sentence. For the Left as well, humorous art, especially of the camp and tacky variety, never seems quite proper. So I wanted to know how John understood these elements of his work, and how he negotiated any tension between political accountability and life as an independent artist.

John certainly operates within a political discourse — he has no trouble defining his art in that way. Yet a tension does exist, since even the most committed film and video makers operate in realms quite different from the 'nonartists' they work with and represent. This comes up in the interview when John recounts his work with Toronto's AIDS Action Now — their hope for educational tools and his frustration with tapes so narrowly defined. I later tried to draw out this point by asking whether he was ambitious, since all Canadian film and video makers, no matter how politically motivated, need to generate a public persona for themselves, not simply for their work, to pro-



Lance Eng in John Greyson's Urinal

voke critical attention and secure funding. Most independent media makers spend 90% of their time fundraising, so selling oneself as a creative and responsible producer is a necessity.

John also represents a second generation of Canadian video makers intent on subverting the dominance of Cinema, by stirring the conventions of video art into cinematic fiction and documentary. Sadly, I see little interest from Cinema academics in this crucial movement. My bias should be clear: I hope to encourage innovative documentary. The current fascination with more fully hybrid specimens intrigues me as well, especially those that graft film and video conventions, yet I see great ferment in documentary and foresee its power to disrupt mainstream Cinema and mainstream Video Art as greater than the so-called postmodern hybrids.

Readers should keep in mind that I have followed standard interview practice: the taped conversation has been drastically edited to 'squeeze the water out' and to read like written prose. (John approved and made some changes to this edited version.) Also, as in standard interview practice, even in ethnography, tension exists between a sort of psychoanalytic mode, which favours an unstructured go-with-the-flow conversation, and an inductive/deductive mode that follows a set question routine, testing hypotheses, etc. This interview certainly reflects a tension on my part between questions of authorship and more structural/materialist concerns. John is both a fascinating artist and part of a larger formation of politically motivated, 'second-generation', video producers working in innovative documentary. On the one hand my interest in John's biography, and questions about intentions and ambitions plays on his work as unique products of an 'important' artist. On the other hand, the Q. and A. format plus the questions about artistic accountability show my attempts to root John within political movements and video/film history. Whether he agrees or not.

My conversation with John took place in 1990 at his apartment in a Toronto artist's co-op, shortly after the premiere of *The Pink Pimpernel*.

This interview forms part of a book in progress, a study of Canadian film and video makers working in documentary, to be published by Between The Lines Press, Toronto, Spring, 1992. c. Peter Steven and Between The Lines.

PETER Was there anything in your background that led you toward comedy, art, and being a provocateur?

JOHN We got a lot of encouragement at home to paint, write and do plays, and I went to a technical high school rather than the university route. It was when I came out into the gay community in Toronto that I started to put art and humour together. In the late 70s there was an incredibly well established gay community, so the humour in the tapes and performance pieces was partly a way of taking that on, and to a certain extent laughing at some of the arrogant aspects of gay culture. You always reject your elders, I suppose. But I want to emphasize that the humour in my work is always fond, never vicious or mean, in relation to the community.

PETER Are there particular conventions in mainstream documentaries that really bother you? Have you been able to challenge these in your work?

JOHN Voice of God narration is pretty high up on my bad list. At the same time I can think of good reasons to use it, as a way to shape content and capture information, etc. I'm most interested in taking conventions and playing with them — not rejecting them. I think that's more useful. In *The World is Sick (Sic)* for example, I use an authoritative C.B.C.-type narrator to provide lots of information, but at the same time that narrator is critiqued and their immense bias concerning AIDS is exposed.

Conventions should be kept in historical perspective. if you look at The Journal or at music video you see that the mainstream continually appropriates and there's plenty of flux. It's not quite as fixed as some formal theorists think. This year's bourgeois conventions are sometimes last year's cutting edge. The extent to which TV advertising appropriates the underground is phenomenal. But I'm just as interested in how people take chances with content.

PETER How do you see your role as an independent producer working with community groups? For instance, do you feel accountable to a particular sector of the gay community?

JOHN Before *Urinal* my work broke into two camps, the gaythemed work and the more conventional documentaries. Most of the work I've done comes out of committees (including the non-gay work for Nicaraguan solidarity and with the Ontario farmworkers) and I see my role as part of a dialogue with these groups. For the gay work I see myself as a speaker in a roomful of people. I try to propose a set of ideas and challenges. With the gay-themed work I've felt that I could cut loose much more, but I would never dream of working that way where I wasn't centrally involved, for example, with the farmworkers.

In social change documentaries there is often a divide between the maker and subjects, and the trick is to try and erase that divide. I'm more and more uncomfortable with that. In fact, I'm not sure I'd do another tape on Nicaragua or farmworkers or any other subject so far outside my experience. I feel that discomfort even with gay themes, because my own specificity hardly 'speaks for' any gay community, so for example in *The World is Sick (Sic)* I set up a parallel discourse about the narrator which I hope suggests an internal criticism. Also, at the beginning of the tape I say, "This is a Torontocentric version of the conference, proceed with caution."

The struggle to define own's own image is most important, and yet I think it's too simplistic to prescribe what people can or can't do or say. I think in the recent controversies [about cross-cultural representation, ed.] there's been an assumption that everyone is working with realist forms. In fact, many artists are trying to deconstruct assumptions about realism, about truth, about identity. The indignation of certain loud-mouthed white writers in the Writers' Union, for example, has distorted what the real issues of the debate actually are. A much more productive dialogue is happening between a newer generation of artists and critics, interrogating how

representations are constructed and who constructs them.

PETER Let's continue with this theme of the independent producer working with community groups, and be more specific. When you were making *The World is Sic k (Sic)* did you discuss the structure or the politics of the tape with people in the AIDS committees? Or did they give you a free hand?

JOHN It wasn't a formal relationship since I was a member of AIDS Action Now working inside the group. I spent a lot of time talking to other people in the group, working on the campaigns, and doing interviews to find out about the group's priorities, trying out ideas on them. Sometimes Tim McCaskall and George Smith would just roll their eyes and say, "Oh god, that Greyson, he's going to do his own thing no matter what we say."

The World is Sick (Sic) leaves out the struggles that went on behind the scenes among the activists at the Montreal conference, especially the conflicts between the New York ACT UP delegation and everyone else. It was of little importance compared to the immense success of our collaborative interventions that week. PETER Did you consider that self-censorship?

JOHN Censorship is such a buzzword. In any case I much prefer the notion of strategic compromise. It's a question of engaging and negotiating with your subjects, since you share their subjectivity. Making tapes like The World. involves a social contract of responsibilities, of respect for differences within a group. Imposing a particular political or artistic vision is inevitable, and can't be erased, but it can also become selfish. To me anyone who 'stays true to their vision' at the expense of their subjects is a pig and ends up walking all over people!

With *The World...* I was very much involved in the committee and wanted to capture all the work we had been doing—the experience and the overlapping agendas. Yet obviously some of what's in that tape were my concerns, particularly the critique of the C.B.C. and the attempt to show international activism in Aids work.

PETER The Pink Pimpernel was done at the same time and to some extent uses different artistic strategies for dealing with similar issues.

David Gonzales in John Greyson's Urinal



JOHN *Pink...* was meant to be a propaganda tape for Aids Action. Now, whereas *The World...* was designed to be a broader overview. *Pink...* was designed to focus on the struggle over treatment drugs, so I was looking for a metaphor about those issues. During 1989, the media was full of the French Revolution bicentennial, which suggested to me the Scarlet Pimpernel and a humorous way to deal with my subject. AIDS Action Now wanted a larger audience and we needed to give people a sense of what activism can mean in concrete terms. Of course, I inserted my own concerns into PINK... as well, including a critique of the sweeping authority of safe sex campaigns, the stuff about dandies, and the other in-jokes about filmmakers and lost gay history. It hasn't worked that well as a recruiting tape for the group. They need something shorter, more pragmatic and introductory.

PETER Your latest work has adopted/played with the conventions of T.V. and music videos. That contrasts somewhat with your first tapes that came out of video performance and social documentary. Does that change stem from the more advanced technology now available in the community access production centres or do you feel that T.V. style should be the main discourse?

JOHN Early video history is all about the back and forth between high art and community documentary, and it's important to remember that some of the most interesting challenges to cinema verite [and direct cinema, ed.] came from video. Nowadays, music video is the only place where there's any visual innovation in the mainstream — I'm referring to their layering of images and uses of abstraction. Of course, the formal experimentation only takes place because everything is firmly anchored to the image of the lead singer and the logic of the format.

I'm interested in expanding my audience, making the work fun and engaging, and producing new content. I'm interested in taking images apart and putting them back together. I love special effects, particularly the *meaning* of special effects, as counterpoint and as an opportunity to expand how we look at the world. I often think of Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* and his immense commitment to technical innovation in getting across new ideas.

PETER You stated a moment ago that you didn't want to separate technical effects from content, that you hoped to get people involved. That's also related to the humour in your work isn't it?

JOHN The dominant tradition in humour assumes a position at a mythical centre, like the mainstream stand-up comic. Then there's community humour that speaks in the vernacular and speaks for all those people who weren't in the stand-up comic's audience, of disenfranchised audiences. My work differs slightly from both. My victims are institutions and conventions. The humour isn't witty repartee contained in dialogue between the characters. It grows from the construction of the scene — like making fun of cheap tricks in music videos.

I've never liked the arrogance of the straight white avant-

garde film tradition. For me if the subject proves difficult or demanding I try to use humour as a bridge over the tough spots. That way audiences are more likely to stick it out. It comes back to accountability. Artists have an immense responsibility to communicate and respond to their audiences. That's what I mean by strategic compromise — negotiating that responsibility.

I like the surrealists. Magritte's a good example. He was both incredibly philosophical and playful. He knew that his audiences weren't going to follow too far with scientific theories of perception, etc. so he made his paintings engaging and popular.

PETER Why don't more artists use humour?

JOHN Humour has been one of the central strategies of video and performance art for the past decade (Tanya Mars and Marg Moores for example.) Social change documentarians have often been terrified of humour since it only seemed like laughing at their subjects who were oppressed; there's nothing funny about oppression. It's almost been taboo. Work coming out of oppressed communities seems more likely to use humour as a fight-back, empowering mechanism, helping to get people through. With AIDS, it's a way of getting us through this immensely horrible time we're living in.

PETER One aspect of *The* World is Sick (Sic) that bothered me was the use of a man in drag for the on-screen T.V. reporter. That device of the woman in authority who's repressed but gets turned around by being sexually liberated seems pretty stale.

JOHN Well I think a man in drag is always an overdetermined image. I'd like to live in a world where a man in drag is only a sign for a man in drag. The lousiness of the drag was deliberate. Sometimes s/he looks like Harpo Marx. I wish I'd taken it much further and found a more constructive way to skew the position of the narrator. Of course drag history has different streams, like the incredibly bitchy tradition of straight drag in England. What you see in *The World...* is different from that. The women I've talked to don't find the narrator in drag offensive, just weird and distracting. The issue has come up with audiences and it may detract from the more central issues in the tape, such as the focus on international grass-roots activists. By the way, the CBC reporter is not 'sexually' liberated in the tape — s/he joins the demo for reasons of political solidarity.

People in the CBC are repressed. They don't take chances and they're incredibly threatened by the spectre of video artists and independent producers. The thing that keeps our work off the air is their concept of editorial control — they haven't had their dirty paws all over the work from the beginning, and so as a result they don't want to air it. They know the importance of the issues we deal with but they want to do it themselves and repackage it into their own boring and depoliticized formulas. We're threatening because we do things for ourselves.

PETER How do you see the NFB in all this?

JOHN I have little hope for the NFB and it's not just because they won't let gays in. They seem threatened by innovation and addicted to mediocrity, like the CBC I would prefer the whole thing go under and have the money go to independent artists. The arts council system of arm's-length funding and peer juries creates a more productive and equitable situation. That system can be lobbied and the community can have much more say in its structures. Also, it provides an entry point for first-time artists. Every other structure tends to perpetuate itself at the expense of artists.

PETER Has your work been influenced by film or video theory?

JOHN Obviously. I can use Urinal as an example. I was interested in exploring why the issues of washroom sex weren't being taken up in the gay community despite the efforts of Courtwatch and The Right to Privacy Committee (two groups that protested police surveillance and entrapment of men in washrooms). Urinal addresses the incompatibility of various intellectual discourses and refers to academic segregation, it attempts to decentre the author's voice by having the six characters serve as six narrators. I did a lot of research for Urinal: looking at Toronto crime tabloids from the fifties, analysis from a civil libertarian point of view, and I discovered Leroi Jones' play, The Toilet. Foucault's analysis of the construction of sexuality in society became privileged in the film. I felt there were fundamental contradictions between these sources in approaching this complicated issue. The gay and lesbian characters embody those complications and contradict each other.

PETER You are one of the best known video producers in Canada and incredibly well connected. Cameron Bailey in Toronto's Now magazine put *The World...* and *Pink Pimpernel* in the 1989 top ten and called you 'video's bad boy'. Do you work at that? Would you consider yourself ambitious?

JOHN It's inaccurate to call me video's bad boy. Lots of people are doing it. In Canada, Marc Paradis, Colin Campbell, Joe Sarrahan and Paul Wong are some of the queer bad boys. Their work may not appear to have as obvious a political agenda as mine perhaps, but we have a lot of other things in common. For myself, I want dialogue with gay audiences. My work has never attempted to convert an uninformed or hostile public and bring them over to the wonderful world of gay liberation. The tapes wouldn't really recruit anyone. My work tries to invite people in. I want to engage with feminists, start a dialogue, such as, 'Here's what gay men are up to, what do you think?'

Ambition is a word we're not supposed to think about. I always get defensive. Perhaps my work is known for a few reasons. I've produced eighteen works in ten years so people can say "this guy must be doing *something*". Also, it's fairly topical. Perhaps most important has been the very supportive infrastructure of gay and lesbian festivals that have brought out huge audiences. I want to reach a larger audience.

When I started working in the early eighties artists were giving up on the notion of video as a discrete practice. They fell off the high modernist horse, started to re-engage with documentary issues and the dominant media and began the rebirth of a much more engaged avant-garde. I was really lucky to start working in the eighties as a gay man. There's been a strong confident gay community that keeps growing even in the face of AIDS. So I didn't have to do a *Word Is Out*. I felt free to experiment.

GREYSON WORKS USING DOCUMENTARY CODES.

(* Works discussed in the interview.)

THE VISITATION. 1980. 3/4 inch video. A pseudo documentary with performance sequences on gay life in Toronto, 'narrated' by a gay radio station.

*MANZANA POR MANZANA. 1982. Beta. A portrait of the Nicaraguan city of Esteli, focusing on farmworkers and grassroots Sandinista militants.

*TO PICK IS NOT TO CHOOSE. 1983. VHS. Produced for the Ontario Farmworkers Union, a tape that outlines the joys and hardships of seasonal farmworkers in southwestern Ontario.

MOSCOW DOES NOT BELIEVE IN QUEERS. 1986. VHS. A 'construction' that uses documentary sequences, but also a documentary frame that uses constructions. Based on a trip to a Soviet youth conference and featuring Rock Hudson submarine movies.

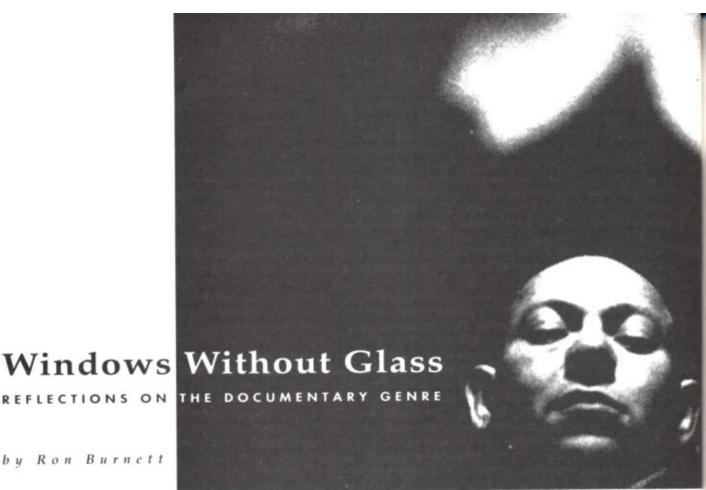
*URINAL 1989. 16mm. A drama documentary hybrid based on the arrests of gay men in Ontario public washrooms, featuring analysis by Sergei Eisenstein, Langston Hughes, and other gay and lesbian historical figures.

*THE WORLD IS SICK (SIC) Beta. 1989. On the Fifth International Conference on AIDS, 1989, Montreal, featuring analysis by members of Toronto's AIDS Action Now, a C.B.C. narrator in drag, Pink Panther cartoons, and a dizzy array of cheap video effects.

*The Pink Pimpernel Beta. 1989. The lead character as dandy activist, smuggling AIDS treatment drugs into Canada. His escapades jostle with documentary and performance sequences.

Other works, best described as short fictional constructions, include THE PERILS OF PEDAGOGY (1984), THE JUNGLE BOY (1985), a MOFFIE CALLED SIMON (1985), THE ADS EPIDEMIC (1986).

All tapes distributed by V-Tape, except *Urinal*, which is distributed by DEC Film and Video.



by Ron Burnett

La Jetée by Chris Marker

In 1981 during a public presentation in Paris at La Cinématheque Française, Jean Rouch said the following:

> "I am an ethnographer and a filmmaker. I have discovered that there is no difference between documentary films and fiction films. The cinema, which is already an art of the double, which presents us with a constant movement from reality to the imaginary, could best be characterized as a cultural configuration which balances between various conceptual universes. In all of this the last thing to worry about is whether reality as such has been lost in the process of creation." 1

Lest Rouch be misinterpreted by purists of the documentary genre he went on to say that as a filmmaker he creates the realities he films. He sees himself as a 'metteur en scene' as well as someone who has to improvise everything from camera angle to camera movement during the shooting of a film. This process is inspired by the kind of personal choices which inevitably rely upon the imagination of the filmmaker. The key to Rouch's approach here is the role which he sees artifice playing in the construction of any image or as he put it, the way the filmmaking process irrespective of genre is ultimately a sharing of dreams at the level of production and performance. Rouch's statement can be seen as a counterpoint to efforts on the part of documentary filmmakers to over-invest in the realist enterprise. It could also point the way to an examination of why images which "look" real have such a seductive appeal. Most importantly what Rouch suggested is that the image doesn't play as important a role in the production of meaning as filmakers would like to believe. In much the same manner as Chris Marker in "Sans Soleil", Rouch's statement questions the place of referentiality within the documentary form and to some degree looks outside of the image for an understanding not only of the message but of its relationship to performance and projection.

In 1986 Richard Leacock, in a piece entitled "Personal Thoughts and Prejudices about the Documentary," 2 proposed some of the same ideas as Rouch. By the end of his short article, however, he retreats and discusses the documentary as a genre capable of capturing something true and real in the world. The key word for me is capturing. For is that not

^{1.} From documents presented at the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the National Film Board in June of 1989.

^{2.} Ibid.

a crucial component of seduction? To imagine that the "real" as such is just a sign system waiting to be incorporated as image, suggests a collapse of levels and of difference. The postulate that the real is open to capture can only be made when the filmmaker imagines that he or she is in control of the reality they are filming. They also have to imagine that they will control what the spectator will see. The desire for seduction in this case is also a desire for others to be seduced.

For the real to appear in a film it must first be subjectively apprehended. This means that "it" exists as the term of a relation, the real only becoming so if a spectator decides to engage in the process. This is a slippery slope and illustrates why a filmmaker may want to "capture" the real as a way of escaping from the contradiction that an image remains just an image irrespective of what is shown.

When Neil Davis, an N.B.C. cameraman died in Thailand during an abortive coup (1985) he fell after being shot, but his camera continued to run. His death, according to the news media who used the footage was recorded by him. Of course that is an impossibility. But what it points out is a fascination with visualizing that which can never be seen, preserving the process of dying as if life and death can conjoin through the power of the cinema and the power of the image.

To "see" death on the screen one must see the death of another. But what then is one seeing? During the Vietnam War Buddhist monks burned themselves in front of movie cameras. It was an act of supreme sacrifice, supreme protest. But it remained, once projected on the screen or on television, not the record, not even the preserved etchings of death, but the death of our separation from the act itself. One viewed and saw through an empathy for those men what it meant to be seen dying. The monks knew that the substance of their protest was visual, they also understood better than anyone else that "seeing" death was only possible from within life, and even then there was no guarantee that anyone would mourn. This act of preservation is itself an activity of death because the "visualizations" of the cinema cannot be quantified, cannot be reduced to the convenience of the image as a representation.

The image does not replace the reality from which it has been "taken" (Does the camera remove some part of the real onto celluloid? Is the piece of reality which the photograph appropriates replaced or returned after it has been taken? Or is reality in any case merely an image awaiting some form of recognition by the camera?) but it is the viewer who is seen as an appendage to a set of givens which seemingly delineate for him or her the boundaries between cognition, fantasy and the visible.

In 1989 André Poquet in a presentation to an *International Symposium on the Documentary* which formed part of the celebrations for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the National Film Board said the following:

Reality in the cinema is reduced to what can be seen and heard. Such information produces 'documentary' without a point of view, which makes Jean Baudrillard say: "It is precisely when they seem the most faithful, true and accurate that images are the most diabolical." And it is increasingly such images that are sent over the airwaves in response to the dictates of mass media technology. Baudrillard continues, " ... it is when they start to contaminate reality, to model it, when they conform to reality only in order to distort it, when they telescope reality, when they short-circuit reality, that images transmit knowledge." ³

In 1982 I interviewed Johan van der Keuken, a Dutch filmmaker whose films have not been seen very much in North America, but who is recognized in Europe as one of the great practitioners of the documentary cinema. The interview was published in a different form in *Cine'-Tracts*. Here are some crucial excerpts:

RON BURNETT So much of what you are trying to do in your films is a response to the history of the documentary, the way in which the documentary has tried to set up a false window/mirror on the world. The genre presumes itself to be showing what is happening in the reality around us but it rarely tries to bring out the complexity of what it is shooting. It rarely tries to engage the spectator in a self-reflexive process to foreground the political, economic and social context of which the film is a part. The window presumes a clarity on the part of the filmmaker, a unified view of the world, a homogeneity, a lack of contradiction - all these are perspectives which I think you are trying to work against. There are two levels at which I perceive you operating. One is at the level of the reality that you are trying to depict and show and the other is a level of discourse in which you try to comment upon and politicize the way reality is understood and seen. I would like to understand how you are affected by what you are filming and then how you feel you are influencing the images and realities which you show. You are trying to include two sets of complex elements simultaneously in the act of filming. Does the history of representation, the history of the documentary, overwhelm the spectator's capacity to recognize the level of critique which you are trying to construct?

VAN DER KEUKEN In my film Springtime, the economist Claude Ménard plays a crucial part. The documentary for me is only part of what I am trying to do. I am trying to account for a thinking process. The portrait of Claude Ménard is a double process: my inquiry into a certain set of problems and his self-reflexive attempt to formulate an answer to these problems. Film as a finished product only presents the strongest stages, the most effective moments of a long process: that is, it puts together strong points, and this does not allow for insight into the whole itinerary. Claude Ménard's interview section in the film contains moments of uncertainty, where you may feel that he is not in the right setting perhaps, but I include that uncertainty so that the spectator may see where the whole process comes from - mine and his. Every time I watch Springtime with an audience I get tense because I

^{3.} Ibid

don't know if it works, whether or not people will accept this intrusion on their normal viewing experience. Audiences expect results, polish, they cannot accept weak phases in a product. This is where the history and ideology of representation is so strong. To me it was important to transform the process and go through these uncertain phases and try and give the audience a place in any discussion of the film by in effect opening the text up to them, reinventing its premises, relocating the viewing experience.

RON BURNETT Why is it so important for you to disrupt the audience's desire for a finished product?

VAN DER KEUKEN That depends on the phase you are in yourself as a filmmaker and for me it changes from film to film. Springtime brought resistance when it was shown on T.V. and in the Cinématheque in Holland, but my next film was wellreceived. All my films have breaks within them to try and alert the audience to the fact someone, in this case a filmmaker, is presenting them with a point of view but the images also have to touch the audience and ironically that may contradict what I am trying to do.

RON BURNETT Do you try and provide the audience with tools to unravel the ideology of the documentary? Or do you think that it is the way documentary films structure meaning, frame enunciations for example, which determines the unraveling?

Van der Keuken — I fictionalize in order to arrive at truth. In Springtime you have people speaking and there is the pretension of truth - because that is the commitment of the filmmaker - to go and see these people, listen to them talk etc ... I cannot guarantee that what they are saying is true but I can establish relationships between the people speaking and the audience which may or may not bring out the truth.

During a recent visit to the Marshall Islands I worked with a group of video documentarians. These were local people devoted to cataloguing and saving their culture on videotope. The impulse to do this came in part from the rapidity with which their traditional cultural forms of expression were disappearing. They wanted to build an archive which would outlast them. They didn't care whether the image was true or not. In fact they saw documentary video as somewhat similar to oral traditions of the past. To reinforce this point they filmed elders seated in a primitive studio essentially recounting significant stories of the past but also describing traditional approaches to farming and the use of coconut husks to produce twine. In both cases the question of truth or fiction was irrelevant. The image served a particular purpose and its role as image was to "speak" about the subject under examination.

This lack of self-reflexivity was promoted by the videomakers as essential to their task. Oral history as a method proposes a kind of documentary truth which is very attractive. The elder speaks with the same authority which he would have in "real" life. Questions of representation are secondary because

the voice of the elder supercedes other concerns. The symbolic systems used by the elders are not seen as constructed but form part of a body of naturalized knowledge which the video image merely activates. Questions which I asked about their exposure to television and to the cinema were disregarded. Thus the history of that exposure which crucially informed many of their aesthetic choices was also seen as irrelevant. This would suggest that part of the attraction of the medium is precisely the ease with which it can be taken over, the ease that it is, with which one culture can integrate the concerns of another culture through the mediation of technology.

There was also a presumption of authenticity which I found contradictory in part because of the studio setting but also because the camera set-up, for example, was derived from traditional norms in place throughout the television industry. The videomakers were unmoved by my questions about the use of the camera because in part the aesthetic questions which I raised seemed to be irrelevant. The truth would surface irrespective and the camera was the least of their worries. They were more concerned with making the elders feel comfortable in the studio (given the high temperatures and poor air conditioning).

The crucial question here is what vantage point can I take with respect to the choices which the Marshallese made? It may be that nothing of value to indigenous cultures can be yielded in the process of translation from the way that they use video to my own preconceptions about the medium. The role of visual media and notions of self-reflexivity are more important for imperial cultures than for colonised ones. But their attitude would suggest that colonised cultures themselves have somehow escaped the influences of modern media, which as anyone who has been watching the growth and development of the video cassette recorder for example, knows is not the case. This still doesn't lessen one of the central dilemmas of documentary and ethnographic work with th film and video. For the ethnographer it may be more important to uncover both the applicability and effects of the technology than to let the technology work its way through the society in question and let that society find the measure of its own response. I think that it would not be too radical an assertion to say that the response of indigenous cultures to foreign cultural phenomena cannot be ascertained clearly until those cultures have devised strategies of response, whatever form those responses might take.

Working its way through — what do I mean? A process perhaps which may not be open to external examination and, without wanting to push the point too far, a process which may produce forms of internal and culturally specific images which cannot be judged, evaluated or examined from the outside. I want to be careful here because I am not suggesting that a vantage point cannot be found which might permit one culture to examine another, but there is the matter, and I consider it to be an important one, of how we go about understanding our own history with respect to modern media, let alone the history of other cultures.

There is a tendency, manifest in many ethnographic and documentary projects but even more so when film and video are put to use, to presume that what other cultures choose as







Sans Soleil by Chris Marker

images can actually be translated, and it is this presumption which I think needs to be contested because what is inevitably involved are complex sign systems which our own culture has had difficulty in interpreting for itself, let alone for others. This is a fascinating and perplexing problem. It suggests a kind of opaqueness which the universalizing tendencies of modern film and television theory have not grappled with. But the question needs to be asked and it may in fact be applicable to a more general question concerning the effectiveness of any appropriation of the 'real' onto the screen

On the other side of this debate about cultural specificity what can be said about countries as different as Australia, India, Taiwan, New Guinea, Tanzania, Israel, Indonesia and the United States sharing a similar and explosive growth in the availability of video cassette recorders and camcorders? Does the presence of video technology, its mere presence, convey a set of similar concerns, a meshing of cultural and artistic traditions? Does the existence of mini-videotheaters throughout Asia showing a mix of tapes from Hong Kong and Hollywood suggest *uniform* modes of understanding and comprehension? (Hollywood's challenge to cultural specificity has yet to be seriously examined by documentarians.)

Eric Michaels who worked with aborigines in Australia addressed many of the above issues through his involvement with the Yuendumu. Most of the detail which follows is available through his superb monograph on the Aboriginal Invention of Television.4 He talks about how the videomaker, Jupurrula, set out to make a video about the massacre of Aboriginal peoples at Coniston. Briefly, in 1928 a white trapper and prospector, Frederick Brooks was killed at Crown Creek near Coniston by two members of the Walpiri tribe. Subsequently the police massacred over one hundred members of the tribe and Jupurrula wanted to go to the site of the killings in order to retell the story from an Aboriginal point of view. Aside from the fascinating details of how the tape was actually made Michaels comments on the use of landscape shots in the video. "The most striking characteristic is exceptionally long landscape pans; indeed there is more attention to landscape than to actors or action. This could easily be dismissed as the result of naive filmmaking in which static landscapes, which prove easier to record than moving people, receive more attention. These extremely long, uninterrupted takes are also associated with unsophisticated filmmaking."5

Michaels goes on to discuss how the landscape pans are in fact very complex and how every feature of the landscape has

 Eric Michaels, The Aboriginal Invention of Television in Central Australia 1982-1986 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986). a set of meanings attached to it. The meanings, which are sometimes historical and often symbolic, cannot be understood by viewers unfamiliar with the culturally specific readings which the Walpiri confer on the image and which they expect the image to contain. It should be mentioned that Jupurrula made this videotape with a group of Walpiri and that all of the people involved had had extensive exposure to white European culture and in particular to video through rental stores in the district. It is therefore even more fascinating that their experience as viewers wasn't translated in the videomaking and that they worked so hard to make the medium reflect their own cultural interests.

This shouldn't be surprising because there remains a vast gap between the arrival of new technologies and the way in which those technologies are used. Thus, the availability of video and the use to which the medium is put may not provide us with enough information as to its effects. In addition, any extrapolation of effect may not be able to account for the complexity of indigenous responses which are located in quite specific cultural and historical frameworks. Allen S. Weiss has commented on this in a recent article in Art & Text. "We might remember, as a cautionary tale, the story told by Eric Michaels about the Aboriginal television program where all that 'we' saw was the most banal sort of 'home video' depicting an empty, bleak landscape; but the tribal members observed the confluence of Dreamtime and historical representation, of myth and legend, in a landscape signifying an originary event of their culture. It is precisely within such an ironic intercultural misunderstanding that the 'magic of the earth' truly escapes us: even if we know of their history, and their gods, we also know that their deities cannot touch us. We can never truly know their art if we do not believe in their gods."6

If we take the above at face value then there really is little, at a universal level, to connect one culture to another. My own empathy for the Dreamtime for example, both as a mode of storytelling and as lived experience does not mean that I have genuinely understood the way in which Aboriginal culture lives the Dreamtime. It means that what I can say about Aboriginal culture through images is limited. It suggests that the documentary form serves at best a limited purpose in crossing the boundary between different cultures. Only recently Eric Michaels critiqued Bruce Chatwin's book because of the author's almost presumptuous romanticism and clear inability to understand the complex history and use of "dreaming tracks." While his critique does not ultimately challenge ethnography it is clear that Michaels was very much caught up in trying to overcome any essentialist arguments with respect to Aboriginal culture. He was concerned with how authors like Chatwin use aboriginal culture to further their own aims while at the same time (disavowing any connection to the forms of anthropological discourse which they are creating. Under the guise of fiction/diary Chatwin transformed aboriginal concerns into his own, but that may well be what is most interesting about the book in any case.

There is therefore an inevitable tension between the particular and the general, between the contingencies which make one historical event more important than another, and the ability which our culture has to situate our comprehension of

^{5.} Ibid., p. 62. Michaels often refers to the research in this monograph as fieldwork but in some senses he goes far beyond fieldwork, per se. He enters the realm of policy recommendations and has clearly written the monograph for researchers as well as politicians and bureaucrats.

Allen S. Weiss, "Outside In: Some New Improved Anxieties of Influence", Art & Text No. 35 (Summer, 1990) p. 97.

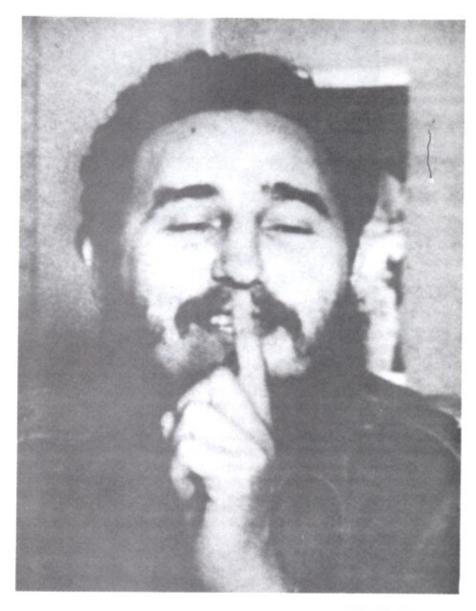
Eric Michaels, "Para-Ethnography," Art & Text No. 30, p. 48.

forms of symbolic organization external to our own.

In terms of video this is a very serious problem because the image - images which come from somewhere else - tend to suggest a kind of transparent directness, an intercultural nexus, which makes it seem as if they can be understood. Put another way even the naming of that portion of the Walpiri video which deals with landscape may send us off in the wrong direction simply because of the etymological history and cultural weight of the term landscape. This doesn't mean that a pan of a landscape is not one, rather, the pan as such means one thing to us and another to the Walpiri. And if we are to comprehend the differences we must in the first instance, be quite aware of the 'effect' which the video has had upon us. As John Von Sturmer has remarked an ethnographic/documentary film or video can attempt to show the truth viewed from the outside as if it is operating from within.8 I would extend his comment to suggest that what attracts us to particular forms of visual expression in ethnography, to particular ways of revealing another culture's concerns and dreams, stories and daily life is precisely that we can only see that which we have already anticipated as visual. (This would explain the extraordinary popularity of the documentary film First Contact which uses racist archival films of indigenous peoples in New Guinea as found footage with the result that it appears somehow to be new even though that kind of footage has been seen

before and would under any other circumstances be rejected for its racism. The fascination with the archival material seems to be situated in its apparent innocence, the mere fact that it exists and the pleasure our culture gets from knowing or at least presuming that we have transcended what the footage reveals.) ⁹

The theories which we use in Western cultures to explain



Cuba Si by Chris Marker

the media to ourselves may not be applicable or even useful when applied to what the Walpiri have done. This raises the rather interesting problem that we may be using what Jupurrula made to justify our own particular expectations about video and film as documentary and archival media, expectations, for example, that using the medium may provide Aboriginal peoples with more control over it as a technology.

To some degree those were my expectations in the Marshall Islands and what I was not ready to accept in the first instance was the rather cavalier way in which the local people dismissed the contradictions which I was so bent on explaining to them. They were more interested in my knowledge of the technology and my ability to explain how to light

^{8.} John Von Sturmer, "Aborigines, Representation, Necrophilia", Art and Text, No. 32, p. 135

Ron Burnett, "First Contact: The Ethnographic Film as Historical Document", Papers of the Second Australian History and Film Conference (Sidney: Australian Film and Television School), p. 69



Moi, un noir by Jean Rouch

the studio so as to increase the professional quality of the images they were shooting. The pressure they felt to document their culture came from within a perspective which I had difficulty in handling and which in the final analysis is just not the same as the video or film work which I would do.

My sense then of the contradictions, my categorization of what was important and what wasn't, reflected my own seduction and perhaps unrealistic expectations with respect to the medium. As a further example, the Marshallese made a six hour video of a Christmas ceremony in a local church. Originally they had decided to edit it down into a presentable form but upon reviewing the video they decided to leave it as is. I soon realised after watching a large portion of the tape that the key to its effectiveness was the sense that it was happening in real time. The images became increasingly transparent in part because of their refusal to edit them. As I watched I became more and more concerned with the nuances of the ceremony, the shifts of the camera from one group of people to another, the general stasis of camera position, the way some dancers for example seemed to be out of step with the music. These were details which I would otherwise have dismissed during editing. Let me make a potentially dangerous jump here. The Christmas video was not an example of heightened realism but quite the opposite. The lack of importance conferred upon the camera, the tremendous importance in other words of the ceremony, respected the complex symbolic structure and meaning of an event which didn't have to be broken down into discrete elements. In this sense the video didn't pretend to show anything. It made no presumptions about guiding the spectator to a vision.

Thus we can begin to locate the debate on realism and seduction within the context of expectations about viewer response. The more concerned a documentary is with communicating a set of specific points the more likely it will construct an image for the spectator. In trying to anticipate its own effect, it will make the effort to match the real with the image, producing truth as a referent. This then is a metaphysics of presence precisely at the heart of Western traditions and not easily reproduced by other cultures. It is perhaps not an accident that the Christmas video would easily function as an experimental video were it to be taken out of its context.

I was watching Total Recall recently and began to speculate whether or not it could be described as a documentary film. Film historians and theoretical purists will find this kind of 'bricolage' rather bizarre and while there is an element of the dadaesque in suggesting the connection let me pursue it for a moment. As a fantasy of the future Total Recall recapitulates traditional narrative notions of the fight between good and evil. The action takes place on Mars (which has become a Dantéesque 'other' for Earth bound people) where a megalomaniac controls a large and lucrative mining operation. He exploits the working class in a brutal way. His power is in large part based on the control of the air which people breathe. Stripped of its ambiguity and some wonderful turns in the story (in essence centering on whether the memory of the main character will be used for good or evil purposes) Total Recall is about the victory of the downtrodden and their eventual emancipation. By the end of the film Mars has been transformed into a habitable planet through a transcendent and alien technology which had waited for millions of years to play its proper role in the evolution of life on the planet. (Read creation myth — Earth)

Total Recall is about the fight to crack through the mirrors of simulation, to discover the real world which lies behind every facade. It is a metaphysical film devoted to discovering the truth behind every lie, to disengaging the real from the sign systems which obscure it. In a world where you can take a vacation by having an implant injected into your brain and where memories can be controlled by machines, the hero must not only question reality but his place in it. This is as much a story of revolution as it is a self-reflexive examination of where the best vantage points are for understanding technology and its impact.

What are the connections to the documentary? Let me reverse the question. What connects the documentary as a genre to this kind of fiction? Is it a similarity of thematic concerns? Where precisely does the opposition, if it is one, situate itself? In a sense it is the inability of the documentary to produce the real which transforms it into a piece of fiction. In a world where simulation is the norm any set of referential devices be they an image or the memory of an image can be interchangeable. In all cases it is a question of how much can be imagined which influences whether the image as such refers to something real or not. All of the oppositions between reality and illusion, truth and artifice, depiction and construction tend to elide the role of the imaginary and thus questions how images produce meaning.

Thus it can be argued that the weight which documentary film and videomakers place on truth is a sign of their *lack* of faith in the image and not the reverse. The point is not whether any picture or image is real but how the creative process *makes* it real. And the interesting thing is that the process is so arbitrary because to fabricate reality you have to mold and sculpt it according to a set of norms which are as bound to artifice as any act of creativity. Thus *Total Recall* documents the inevitable failure of technology to dominate human beings. It recognizes that the activity of image creation produces simulations not because they are found objects in a natural environment but because sign systems need not have any direct referents in order to work as signs or to communicate effectively.

Eric Michaels discovered that the landscape of an Aboriginal filmmaker had been constructed through history and culture in a manner which he could not have anticipated. He understood as a result that he could not see what they saw. The seeming transparency of video and film — the ease with which the image suggests closely linked referential patterns is a problem for Western culture in its efforts to use the medium for its own purposes.

The problems which the documentary faces are not in the image per se but in the cultural mystification of Western thought around the truth of signifying systems.

On Tuesday, November 21, 1989 the President of N.B.C. news announced that the network would discontinue

the use of dramatic recreations on the news and documentaries because "... they confuse viewers about where reality ends and re-creations begin." (New York Times, November 21, 1989) "The new policy mandates that any simulation, recreation or re-enactment of any kind in a news broadcast must first be approved by the president of the news division." The problem seemed to be that viewers disregarded the disclaimers that the following scene is a re-creation, etc ... But why did they disregard the clearly printed statements? Clearly the very notion of a boundary between the documentary and the fiction have become so blurred that it didn't matter.

On December 9, 1990 John O'Connor writing in the New York Times described the potential, real and imagined, dangers of the docudrama form in relation to a joint British-American co-production about the Lockerbie disaster in 1969: "The Tragedy of Flight 103: The Inside Story." He describes the ambiguity of a project in which all of the facts in the police investigation are not known and the article is titled A Thriller, Perhaps, but is it Truth? "Granada and HBO officials take pains to point out that their product is not designed as standard entertainment focused primarily on the personalities of the major players. Expert editing highlights the thriller aspects of the docudrama, but the very shape of 'Flight 103' does not lend itself to the tidiness of drama."

What is so interesting here is of course the impulse to recreate the event. It further legitimizes not that it happened, but that there could and should be images of what happened. And of course all of the devices of Total Recall have to be brought to bear because the show will not succeed without them.

Without wanting to push the point too far I'd like to suggest that the documentary genre and its history both in film and video (and I have left out of the above discussion the need to distinguish between the two) reveal a great deal about the kind of metaphysical tradition which dominates our culture. The fact that the documentary has been used as the privileged point of entry or political communication, for attempts to reveal the truth about events and people and social processes is a sign of the seductive charm which images have. It is also a sign of the overemphasis which our culture places on the relationship between seeing and knowing. Sight as such is a mental construct. The connections between seeing, perceiving and knowing are at best only available to us through hypotheses about the results of their interaction. When we speak then of seeing, are we speaking of a process? or of the products of that process? And as the word process suggests, the maelstrom of visual activities which accompany the projection of a film or video cannot simply be reduced to the technological instance represented by the screen. For what is visual as projection is quickly bypassed by spectacle and that takes us into another realm of communication altogether, based on performance, learning and pedagogy - the kind of exchange which would tend to downplay if not marginalize the role of the image and should perhaps lead to a reconceptualization of the institutions which produce images in our society.



Sans Soleil by Chris Marker

Documentary and Figuration

by John McCullough

As apparently out of its territory as it is, Locke's observation is nonetheless interesting as regards the reality problem in theories of documentary

film. The debates that

still surround this genre ("genre" itself being an issue of dispute) clearly represent a fractal unit of a significant epistemological enquiry which can be said to take center stage with Locke and his contemporaries. That is, what role does language play in the transmission of knowledge? If an Idea is moved towards communication what contingencies must be anticipated to insure a "pure" transmission? One begins to second-guess communication and, at the same time, interro-

 John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed.Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.431.

... And there is nothing more evident, than that for the most part, in framing these Ideas, the Mind searches not its Patterns in Nature, nor refers the Ideas it makes to the real existence of Things; but puts such together, as may best serve its own Purposes, without tying it self to a precise imitation of any thing that really exists.

— John Locke 1

gate reality. What may once have appeared as meaning's tight fit — where the representation was coextensive with the world — there

appears, since what Foucault terms the classical period, the departure of language from reality. When Herder claims that language speaks he recognizes that the figural in language must be considered as part of the question of knowledge. The problem is manifest as simply as: How does one know what has just been communicated? Further, how can we come to know ourselves — or anything — as reality when we are made aware of the frame or context of the investigation? This is what is at stake when language speaks.

When one hears or says "It could not be further from the truth" a condition of relations is necessarily presupposed. That is, within this claim there is an 'it' and a 'truth' situated

according to each other. They are kept separate by a measure of analogy: either it is like truth or it is unlike truth. Immediately it can be understood that the problem of all condition is that it significantly confounds interpretation. We are assured of the condition, and by right of this assurance, inhibited in asserting a position from which to evaluate an object's relation to truth. Between what we have said and what we have said it about there is a mediation. We could conceive this as a minimal or maximal interruption (there are theories for both positions) but what seems more interesting than this measurement is the notion that there is a shared consensus about the existence of mediation.2 This is a long way from our opening claim which repressed the acknowledgement of the condition as ground and confidently implied that the object and truth were necessarily discernible and, in some manner, coextensive.

The claim ("It could not be further from the truth") forces itself into a discussion of documentary film. It lies at the core of this genre's ethos. This is the case to the extent that any activity of understanding documentary film as a kind of film or genre of film assumes a split between the real and its representation. That is, a thing called a documentary film is predicated on the lack of unity of the represented and the representation. But this has not been generally acknowledged. When Grierson claimed that documentary film was a creative treatment of reality he was not retreating from claims-to-truth but rather asserting that he, in fact, was able to discern the truth and while artifice was employed in its disclosure there was never a question of confusing the truth with its frame. His statement does not address a condition of filmmaking - it is concerned with the film and with reality both of which are understood as potentially indifferent entities. In this fashion, documentary film attempts to be a pure object irrespective of its condition of construction. It is a commodity exchanged and, by right of its commodification, is assumed to deliver the goods unilaterally and consistently. The object (whether the film or the truth of which it speaks - here they are analogical) is assumed to be fixed. In this case, the condition of relation between the film and its reality is terminably frozen. Nonetheless, it is not enough that this should occur - it is crucial (in documentaries as Grierson envisions them) that discussion (within the film text) of the process of commodification (production, distribution and exhibition) be denied, forgotten, and displaced. Such discussion, asserting the conditions of the object and reality, would have to address the notion of the documentary as construction and as figuration.

If Grierson was to acknowledge the range of figuration in documentary he would undermine the anticipated project of "saying what one means". This closure and overvaluation of intention is consistent with Grierson's designs: its flipside is the commodification of knowledge. The object as reality and the creative truth are perceived, as phrases without contradiction. They were bound into the development of the product:

never to be unravelled and made impartial to their surroundings. In a way, this kind of film is a commodity-spectacle and, as such, it is intent on giving meaning over by being the reality of that which speaks. Its mediation would be transparent and its presentation would aspire to the literal transcription of events. This film claims: "This is the way things are". The literal presumes the position of address and pronouncement designed to engage (attention) and transmit (truth). What becomes noise in the transmission is leakage from that which surrounds the message. Any disturbance of the link between the truth and its reception, any rupture in the documentary, is construed as a failure to communicate. Communication and this crucially involves the intent to communicate - proposes both an originary source and an effect. The documentary-as-intent represses its conditions in order to assert itself as a thesis, a literal claim. What such a move defends is the homogeneity of an assertion, the unilinearity of a communication. A documentary in this manner is designed to be efficient without noise.

Now, it may be justifiably argued that Grierson's entire model is characterized by rhetoricity (in the pejorative sense of that word) and, to this extent, figural in the extreme. Yet, it must be said that what is even more crucial to such a model is the fact that it privileges only a few rhetorical modes. It is understood that communication is made inefficient by noise and it has been variously intuited that multiple rhetorics constitute noise in the grammar of documentary. A flirtation with the rhetoric in and of documentary film would disturb the direct flow from source to destination; It would confuse form with substance and such a dalliance could possibly acknowledge condition in the face of intention. Documentary film could then be nothing more than once-removed from the truth. It would speak of itself as often as it spoke of its object. The delineation between subject and object would necessarily erode; the tunnel that the documentary film constructs to the truth would crumble. In fact, is it not this desire for minimized rhetoric which Richard Leacock expresses when he wishes to be a fly on the wall? It seems that he would, above all, wish to rid the documentary genre of rhetoric. Here, while diametrically opposed to Grierson in the sense that rhetoric and figure are at least acknowledged, there is a shared desire to eradicate this figural component. Grierson represses the figures while Leacock, all too aware of them, wishes to write them out — to have a pure vision. What is this but the epistemology of the reflective consciousness? In a landscape where all apparatus falls away, the reflecting subject may take it all

Leacock may dream about taking-it-all-in-without-beingthere but the truth of the matter is that he is never not there. The subjective, authorial voice which he criticizes as rhetoric in films by Grierson et al. is simply a figure more obvious than others. It is the variety and proportion of rhetoric which must be read as the figuration of any film. What is recognized in this approach is that the documentarized film event is constructed syntagmatically (i.e. as a grammar) but also, by necessity of language, paradigmatically: it is on both axes that studies of the rhetoric of documentary must proceed. If rhetoric and figuration are admitted as fundamental principles of documentary interpretation, then the contrast between

^{2.} Cf, Bill Nichols, "The Voice Of Documentary," Movies and Methods 11, ed.B.Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp.259-273 and Michael Renov, "Re-thinking Documentary: Toward a Taxonomy of Mediation," Wide Angle Vol.8 no.3/4, 1986, pp.71-77.

a Grierson documentary-model and that of Leacock can be fruitfully understood as less about access to truth than the analysis of each filmmaker's preference of formal design. This would suggest that neither Grierson nor Leacock communicate anything but a truth told — it is the telling (the figural as fundamental to the literal) which must be analysed. This is why Leacock's fly-on-the-wall is such a compelling but simultaneously vacant metaphor. A camera-without-apparatus or an eye-without-body is compelling because it promises what we have never seen: a grammar without rhetoric. The concept is not realizable, though, because grammar and the literal are presumed by rhetoric and the figural. The assumption of a place from which to communicate is not the start of a grammar isolated from rhetoric: the very choice, the taking-up, the marking, one could say, of a voice is a selection from a range of rhetorics and figures. In a moment of fated reflection we realize: "I open my mouth and language speaks".

Encountered from another perspective, Leacock's model suggests the potential of addressing the multi-rhetorical documentary. This would be a documentary which was prepared to, if not expose or understand, at least acknowledge its conditional presence. If intent is inextricable from the power of authority then the documentary which imagines itself the recordings of a fly is presumably antagonistic to communication as intent. The purpose of the fly, then, as metaphor for subjectivity is crucial to supposing a displaced subjectivity. That is, because the fly is presumed as without-subjectivity with no place of address — it may afford an image of an entity that would not interfere with anything. It would offer transparent transmission: the fly would deliver the literalness of the literal, the reality of the real. Here, all would be open to investigation. But, in such an extensive discovery the apparatus would have to be considered. The disclosure would eventually demand the apparatus — it could go nowhere else and remain an investigative entity. It is an act of bad faith to conclude that anything can come upon a scene and relate it as a literal reality. That would be to assert that the observer does not condition the scene. To imagine, for instance, that the documenting fly or, more importantly, the position it assumes, is without relation to the observed is but a swing of the pendulum from Grierson's position and, to this extent, caught within a shared logic. It must be remembered that Grierson's design is efficient, Leacock's less so, but both are fundamentally effective. That is, the axis of their operations is the effect. But to even think about effect is to assume and require the dynamics of a context. The absent axis of such documentary models is the condition between observed elements.

If Grierson's model demanded that noise between source and destination be minimized by strict definition of both form and substance the second model's innovation (which is described here as the fly on the wall) resides primarily in its imagined ability to increase exposure by displacing subjectivity. Grierson's messages were efficient only to the extent that they sought specific targets. This is the core of the pedagogical challenge to which his documentary model answered. It is not surprising that Eisenstein, for instance, was assumed to be in accord with this model as his modus operandi was one of efficiency and force. Leacock, on the other hand, was of a mind with Flaherty who intended nothing but the gradual

exposure of the world. If this procedure was pedagogical it was by extension and not by specification. Nonetheless, the goal of each of these models is the nomination of truth as an object of discovery. To this extent, it is crucial that a pedagogy of the documentary be constructed as a discussion of the imbrication of the literal and the figural and, to this extent, always a documentary of pedagogy. All of which is to indicate that rhetoric and figure, generally, constitute a crucial problematic in any discussion of the documentary film. In many ways, their consideration could lead to the end of the documentary genre.

To speak of the figures of documentary is to speak of the manner in which truth is told. In this sense, one may think of Bill Nichols' investigation of the voices in documentary. He has written of such voices but only to the extent that he sees them as markers in a genealogy: "the strategies and styles deployed in documentary, like those of narrative film, change; they have a history."3 So, while the concept of voices is associated with the project of considering rhetoric and figure in the documentary, it has to be maintained that these are not the same project. This is the case to the extent that, for Nichols, the variety of voices represents a mapping of the progression of what he will call the documentary genre. But a study of figural language in the documentary film should not be restricted to the inscription of a historical lineage. Further, such work should be even less intrigued with the possiblity of designating something as a genre. Nichols' work is fundamental in that it is an initial move to map the effects of figural language in documentary film and, in this very gesture, a reorientation of traditional pedagogy regarding documentary. In many ways, to move beyond Nichols would be a return to his primary insight that there is a change or a series of changes in documentary film which cannot be entirely accounted for on the literal level, but where he links voice to the history of a genre a revised enquiry would require an acknowledgement that figural construction is not necessarily contingent with genealogy or chronology. The ruptures that signify a shift in documentary style — the changes of voice are the result of a dense fabric of film language effects. It would be useful to see the work of the filmic figure as a serial process rather than a unilinear causal generation. Nonetheless, Nichols' voices are, indisputably, ruptures that indicate the challenge that the figural poses to any discrete correspondence between utterance and identity. History is not elided in such an analytic gesture but read as a labyrinthine text in its own right — it becomes one of several complex systems in the figuration of the document.

It may yet prove reasonable to postulate that Leacock's reaction to Grierson's particular use of rhetoric (the "voice" as voice-over) and Grierson's earlier reaction to Flaherty's veiled voice provide a foundation for understanding documentary history as the history of the place of the voice. This is not to say, though, that documentary film styles are categorical or that, by extension, any of the styles avoid the problem of language. The recurring relevance of Vertov in the theorization of documentary film seems to substantiate both of these observations. It is in Vertov's work that theorists have observed something

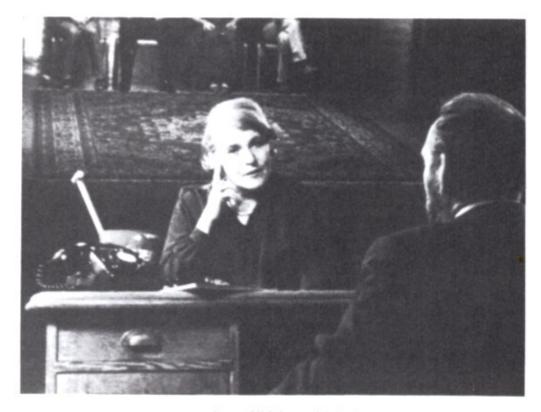
^{3.} Nichols, 259.

of a classical reflexive filmmaking strategy whereby the frames of representation and language, history and iconoclasm and praxis and theory are foregrounded. Techniques in service of this strategy are crucial to much recent documentary work (what Nichols would generally label the period of self-reflexive documentary). In significant ways, in what Michael Renov understands as the relation between the pro-filmic and the text, documentary film has been theorised as taking cognizance of its own language and its relation to the spectator.4 Now that the spectator has entered the field of textual relations an analogy can be clearly drawn with Vertov's Man With A Movie Camera in which all documentation is consciously predicated upon the arrival and attention of the audience. Beyond the sheer resemblance in concerns and strategies it seems that the importance of Vertov's work (and one could include Vigo's Apropos de Nice or Bunuel's Las Hurdes, for instance) for contemporary theory is its presence as unsettled ground in any strictly narrativized history of the documentary film.

If figural language is that which starts the ball rolling it is so only to the extent that it is always

in the position that its choice of a beginning is always a rhetorical move. Documentary is prefigured by figures or, it could be said, it has its origin in re-presentation. Lumiere cannot be said to be without figures -the idea that he is presenting something like the world is his basic trope. This is the central metaphor of all cinema. So it would only be a mapping of the proportion of the figural to the literal which would constitute a history of the documentary film. As for its representation as a genre, one could argue that genre is, like re-presentation, the founding metaphor of its lie. The principle of the

4. In Renov's taxonomy the categories for discovery, while not necessarily chronologized, are related to Nichol's four documentary styles (the voice-of-God, cinema-verite, the interview-based and the self-reflexive). Renov widens the field enormously in that he claims that mediation and not historical periodization is the relevant approach to documentary film analysis. This leads to his claim that documentary film can be understood as a production mediated by four distinct sites or signifying instances which create the meaning effect of the film. These sites are the historical "real," the pro-filmic, the text and the spectator. (p.72)



Annette Michelson and Gabor Vernon in Yvonne Rainer's Journeys from Berlin, 1980

genre is the inclusion of all things alike - as such it places itself within the logic of similitude and identity. In its very likeness, wherein all things are alike, it constitutes the idea of the example, the simulacra. This situation leads to the lingering querie: What's a good example of a documentary film? This is an unanswerable question because it is hard to understand, for instance, how a documentary film can be just like a documentary film. The only logical response is to admit that the genre of documentary film does not exist or, more precisely, that that which is revealed as the documentary film genre is an imposter. The genre exists only to the extent that it can deny the complexity and shifting positions of the field. If this field becomes present its simulation recedes and the mask of genre is eclipsed. The history and the genre of documentary are determined by the voices in documentary but it is by right of this observation that an apparent structure in the history of documentary is highly unlikely.

This is not to say that histories and aesthetics are irrelevant to the study of documentary. In fact, it is in the readings directed at both the history and the aesthetics of the documentary tradition that anyone can come to understand the centrality of figural language to documentary. If today there



The Last of England, Derek Jarman, 1987

appears to be an increasing number of works in all media which challenge the propriety of a genre this is only a reflection of a much larger interest in the dynamics of language. This, in turn, seems to be something of a fascination with the apparent loss of meaning which is theorized as the postmodern condition. While it would be unreasonable to instigate a debate over the postmodern at this juncture it might be worth noting that any documentary aesthetic which we could describe in a contemporary work is not without its analogous styles in documentary history. Whether such analogies are indicative of anything like a tradition is open for investigation but what such an observation suggests is that documentary is of importance not only as a genealogy or as a genre but as the very locus of all discussions of language and cinema. This is the case because at the moment the camera is turned-on, the re-presentation initiated, language starts piling-up on itself as an amalgam of the figural and literal. It is here that the challenge of reading, which is the challenge of language, emerges.

To the extent that, for instance, Sans Soleil, Last of England, Journeys From Berlin, Landscape Suicides and Reassemblage all operate as antitheses to genre traditions and conventions it would be tempting to claim at least a new style in the history of documentary production. This would be a process of citing a series of principles of effect or essences which in some man-

ner or form differentiate themselves from standard production. In this way, this scenario of surveillance and discovery exposes something more of the real. The world, as documentary film history proceeds, is exposed over and over, at times a little more than we had imagined. As an aside, this is a fascinating predicament - our imagination does not exceed the real but, increasingly, it no longer exceeds the symbolic, either. Nonetheless, what is mapped in this process is the operation of figures in documentary film. Even differences and slippages manifested as literal are nonetheless in a supplementary relation to the figural. All manner of categorization is then possible only by access to figuration which is to hobble such a project from the start. The documentary film, as the literal genre, can only be understood through the figure. If Sans Soleil smudges the lines of genre propriety, and if this interpretation can be seen as somehow indicative of a tendency, it most be anticipated that even in terms of Renov's relational meaning effect the result will be arbitrary and specific. But this is not only a result of foregrounded figuration in Sans Solcil for, in fact, this manifestation should be broadly understood as the process of all film texts.

It is useful to understand Sans Soleil, Last of England, Journeys From Berlin, Landscape, Suicides and Reassemblage, in this sense, as readings. Further, they should be perceived as

understanding themselves as readings. This is not to categorize them, though, for reading is already the process of dissolution. That is, the process of reading is such that an object could never be posited as the good object and I refer to this series of films only to the extent that they must appear as aberrations within the category documentary film. They remain, though, about documentary film: crucially in the manner of allusion or association rather than committment to a genre. Here, reading is not privileged as mastery or as the substantiation of the canon but, rather, as compulsion and iconoclasm. It would be at this juncture that Vertov's activities could be re-evaluated for, while he does not necessarily articulate his project as a process of reading, it is within the general horizon of the avant-garde and Russian Constructivism that social action is predicated upon both compulsion and iconoclasm. Fundamental to both operations is the comprehension of language as material. Vertov conceives of a revolutionary practice in the actual fragmentation of the language of film. Much later, Godard and Gorin will assume this project with a series of films that culminates in the concise ideological critique of a news photograph of Jane Fonda. It is with Letter To Jane that some sort of link between Vertov and recent so-called self-reflexive documentarists can be imagined. Nonetheless, it appears that the interesting aspect of these connections is less genealogical than epistemological. That language was ever conceived as material is crucial to knowledge; the study of language, though, can never be as discrete as an attack for there is always something in language that escapes such precision. That which escapes annihilation is figuration. So, while Vertov and Godard/ Gorin may imagine that their analyses were substantial and a determinative effort it would be inaccurate to claim that the issue is closed or the investigation complete. Their objects of enquiry were always figures of communication imagined as material. That is to say, the battle was always waged on a metaphorical level. In some crucial aspect, filmic figures eluded categorization and became manifest elsewhere and this elsewhere is not necessarily somewhere down the line in documentary history but somewhere else in the processes of knowledge. While a film anticipates a reading, to a degree far more intricate than has been acknowledged, a reading has already been inscribed in the representation. The literal is not only infested with the figural but instigated by it. A critical practice, in this case, would have to resemble a dissolving familiarization with figure and text.

The idea of "reading the text" obliges us to consider, once again, the role of pedagogy in relation to something called the documentary film. The documentary genre as a mapping of a history and an aesthetic cannot sustain the field of enquiry. That language can be seen to play a role in knowledge complicates matters enormously as it must be generally understood as its own worst enemy. That is, in language all that is present and potent is assumed to represent that which is absent and impotent and this is language's self-indictment. Clearly, the challenge to film analysis lies in the divergence between the known and the reading; the canon and the interpretation. If we now recognize that reading and language have always been the points of interest in documentary then its analysis will have to account for reading as a critical and

motivated activity. To the degree that this will potentially enliven the academic relationship to documentary film it is contingent on the proposition that interpretation is always a reading and that understanding or knowledge is a reading of the literal as supplemental in and around the figural functions of language. The tried-and-true position that, for instance, Grierson is a rhetorical filmmaker while Leacock is not will have to be replaced by a desire to read these films as multivalent communications. The *political* life of any documentary, then, resides within its reading and this is established and maintained by the motivation to pursue and insure a reading as a meaning.

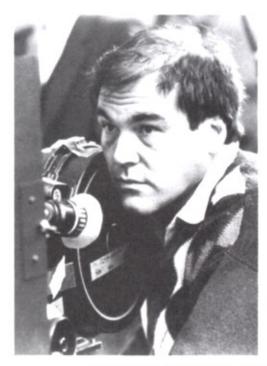
Reading, as the investment in understanding the exchange between the figural and the literal within the documentary film, is critically engaged as a hermeneutic project. While not entirely comfortable with this as a conclusive remark on pedagogy, figuration and documentary I nonetheless regard this as a fundamental move to encounter a shifting field. It becomes clear that central to this critical activity is the idea of the canon. Certainly the canon, as such, is eroded in the process of critical reading but this is not to call for a rejection of the canon. It should be brought on, paraded, and open for business. Why would its exclusion be preeminent in our minds? Its critique is far more valuable as such activity comes to understand the concept of the canon as intimately related to the traditional concepts of identity and presence. The privilege accorded these ideas, caught within the workings of language, is only evidence of something transitory. One can always read Nanook of the North and call for something new; and what of reading La Sange des Betes and demanding something new but with its insight. This is not to say, going to the other extreme, that the canons which now exist in film studies must be maintained; their critique will occur of its own accord and in alignment with a general move to insure reading. The wider the readings, the greater is the erosion-effect. Decomposition is the case of reading; what projects are forseen as political interventions occur only after a certain erosion, when a precise gap is apparent as a challenge.

This is all to say that the present challenge is pedagogical - teaching must give way to reading, just as the literal will have to accept the presumption of the figural. As much as documentary is a genre complete with a history, genealogy and aesthetic known as its tradition this is all in the process of erosion. This is the case for two reasons. First, to the extent that, in the face of repeated attempts to narrativize the history of the documentary film, the figural is always moved to displacement which is nonetheless a site of textual generation. Second, the justification of the metaphor of self-sameness which motivates this tradition of genre is increasingly absent as a critical position. Language speaks and we read back as a response to its challenge. Any point of conclusion, here, is the start of another reading. Such a reading would understand that, while the literal origins of this article reside in Locke, the figural origins lie in two statements by Trinh T. Minh-ha: "I will not speak about, I will speak nearby" (from her film Reassemblage) and "documentary is/not a name" (5).

^{5.} Trinh T. Minh-ha. "Documentary IS/Not a∠Name," October 52, Spring 1990, p.77-98.

Radicalism and Popular Cinema

THE FILMS OF OLIVER STONE



by Robin Wood

The inclusion of an article on the work of Oliver Stone in an issue devoted to the Documentary is not entirely inappropriate. His films have something in common with one kind of documentary (and with much of Godard's work prior to his retreat into the 'aesthetic'): the desire to speak about and comment on what is happening *now*, or has happened very recently and is still immediately relevant, in order directly to influ-

ence public opinion. They also raise yet again the question of bounds: of where exactly the category 'documentary' begins and ends. We all think we know what a documentary is, but when we try to define the term with any precision it proves as slippery as the name of any Hollywood genre. We can of course play safe and define the 'pure western' as a film set in a specific time (the 'frontier' period of American history) and place; yet we all know that the thematic material, the generic conventions, the iconography, the narrative patterns, spill over outside both into movies that refuse such neat containment, and even into other genres: are Drums Along the Mohawk, Lonely are the Brave, Bonnie and Clyde, Coogan's Bluff, Taxi Driver 'westerns'? — Where exactly does one draw the line?

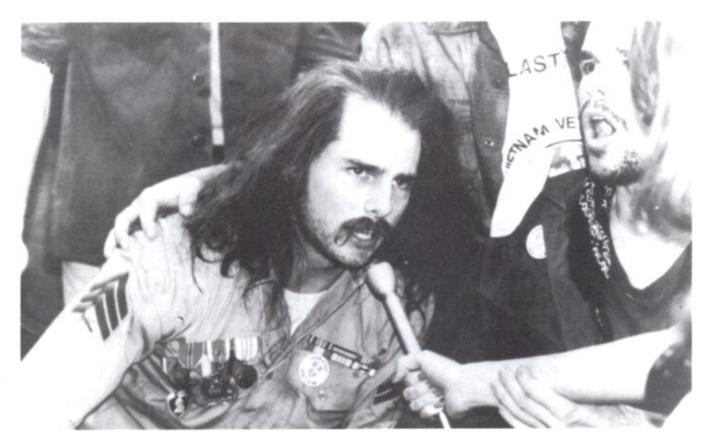


Left: Oliver Stone, during the shooting of Wall Street. Above: Platoon: the Bad Father/Good Father opposition (Tom Berenger, Willem Dafoe).

Similarly, we might define the 'pure documentary' as the recording by the camera of an event that would have taken place if the camera had not been there: Salvador and Born on the Fourth of July (completely dramatized, highly tendentious) are then emphatically not documentaries. Yet we all speak of Nanook of the North (completely dramatized, highly tendentious) as a 'documentary.' The only significant difference seems to be that Salvador employs professional actors while Nanook uses (exploits?) people who, we are assured (we really only have Flaherty's word for it), are doing more or less the things they would be doing anyway. We should agree, I think, that while we need categories for purposes of debate, they are useful only as the roughest of guidelines or markers, and actually lose their utility as soon as we attempt rigid definition. We can mark the extremes of the documentary/fiction opposition (a newsreel and a Mickey Mouse cartoon, perhaps interestingly, they used to be closely juxtaposed in movie programming), but must accept that they mark the extremes of a continuum on which other points might be: the obviously selective documentary, where nothing is staged but the images are tightly organized (Hôtel des Invalides); the narrative film using 'real people' performing their 'real activities' in their 'real locations' (Flaherty); the documentary reconstruction; the 'biopic' (itself covering the widest range of factual accuracy, from The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach to Night and Day); the fictional film using non-professionals (much Italian neo-realism); the fictional film using professional actors but shot entirely on location (The Naked City, much Renoir and Godard), the fictional film drawing upon histori-

cal events (movies about the Titanic, etc.)... When we have reached the marital tribulations of Barbara Stanwyck and Clifton Webb, Mickey Mouse is already within sight. Stone's films (aside from The Hand, which stands so far apart from the rest in time and overt subject-matter that most of us tend to forget he directed it) belong somewhere around the middle of the continuum, drawing on many of the aspects that relate to the concept 'documentary:' this is most obvious in Salvador. with its careful reconstructions of documented historical events woven into a narrative built around the activities of a 'real' person, but the documentary impulse is just as strong in the other films. As for tendentiousness, it has become a commonplace to insist that all filmmaking is tendentious, more or less overtly. The difference between a newsreel and the 'obviously selective documentary' lies purely in that word 'obviously:' a newsreel cameraman does not 'just happen' to be there with his camera handy where the recorded events took place, he has either chosen to be there or been sent (and sent by those with their own particular stake in the action); and it is unlikely that his footage will be screened for the public

I have resisted Stone's work for some years: I tend (by 'nature' or conditioning) to be resistant to movies that seem to want to bludgeon me over the head. But I have come to feel that anyone interested in the possibility of successfully (in both the commercial and artistic senses) sustaining a radical leftist position within the mainstream Hollywood cinema since the '70s must take his work very seriously indeed, examining not just the degree of success but the conditions (hence



Born on the Fourth of July: Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise) denounces 'the leadership of this government.'

restrictions and compromises) that make success possible. The 'bludgeoning,' for example, can be seen not necessarily as the expression of a relatively crude sensibility, but as a direct consequence of the conditions: the sense that, amid the general cacophony of conservative, reactionary voices, the only way a dissident can make himself heard is to shout at the top of his lungs. (The assumption is not necessarily correct: perhaps one ends up merely adding to the uproar: but it is perfectly understandable).

The problem of address is crucial, I think. Stone's films oppose, often with impressive strength and force, the general drift of the culture on the ideological level, and they have reached very wide audiences, but they do so by embracing without question the prevailing means of cinematic expression: I cannot detect a Stone 'style' that distinguishes his work clearly from the current norms. 'Bludgeoning' is by no means peculiar to Stone, it is a dominant principle of our contemporary popular cinema. I have no wish to revive here an Adornoesque attitude to 'mass culture' and the 'mass audience.' Audiences for movies are not and never have been monolithically helpless and passive, they have always covered the full range from passive complicity to critical awareness (leaving aside the intangibles that take place within the unconscious). But I don't think one can doubt, surveying the contemporary Hollywood product, that the situation has worsened, and drastically. Stone's work is characterized by a desperation to communicate with audiences who have been willingly brainwashed and desensitized by the degeneracy of the late capitalist media. (One should add that there is no simple case of Hollywood corrupting its audience: it would be no more and no less true to say that the audience has corrupted Hollywood, as it is clear from the lineups that people are getting what they think they want. We are talking of the whole movement of capitalist culture, toward its final triumph or disintegration - neither of which can be looked forward to with much hope for the immediate future - and one cannot assign blame to its individual components). But if, on the level of the signifier, Platoon and Born on the Fourth of July are virtually indistinguishable form the Rockys and Rambos, the Lethal Weapons and the Robocops (or distinguishable only in the superior intelligence controlling the means), then what becomes of the signified? And what are the alternatives? Unlike many of my colleagues, I don't think there are simple answers to these questions: they represent a genuine, unresolvable quandary. I think the answer implicit in Stone's work is an honorable one, and so is its opposite. (The perspicacious reader will perhaps anticipate here the particular importance I attach, among Stone's films, to Talk Radio).

Of the five films from Salvador to Born on the Fourth of July, which make up the main body of Stone's achievement so far, we may conveniently begin with Platoon and Wall Street, not because they represent Stone at his best (on the contrary, they seem to me the weakest of the five, the two that least repay repeated viewing, where the alienating features of Stone's work — the obviousness, the crudity of attack, the assault on easy targets — are least countered by his elsewhere saving grace, the sense of the difficulty of what he is doing); but because they share, revealingly, an almost identical narrative

structure. It can be charted thus:

- An 'innocent' young man (played in both films by Charlie Sheen) enters a new career situation by his own choice (Chris in *Platoon* has volunteered, Bud in *Wall Street* opts for a career in the stock market against the wishes of his father).
- 2. the new situation is defined as a battleground, literally in *Platoon*, metaphorically in *Wall Street*. (I am not imposing the metaphor on the film: it is a recurrent, indeed insistent, motif in the dialogue, beginning with Michael Douglas's 'Every battle is won before it's fought...It's trench warfare out there, Pal').
- 3. Plunged into this new and dangerous situation, the young man has to make a choice of allegiance between two experienced older men who represent opposed sets of values: in Platoon, the two sergeants (Willem Dafoe, Tom Berenger); in Wall Street, Bud's actual father, both on and off screen (Martin Sheen) and charismatic father-figure Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas). I shall refer to these as 'Good Father' and 'Bad Father' respectively.
- 4. The Good Father is appalled by the situation (the 'battle-ground') but knows he is completely powerless to alter it effectively; he resigns himself to survival and the preservation of personal integrity and decency. The Bad Father accepts the situation and seeks to exploit it for his own ends and satisfaction. The Bad Father is motivated by the desire not only for survival but for power, which the Good Father has repudiated.
- 5. The turning point in both films (it occurs much earlier in *Platoon* then in *Wall Street*, giving the latter film the edge in the maintenance of moral tension): the Bad Father destroys the Good Father: literally in *Platoon* (Berenger is directly responsible for Dafoe's death), financially in *Wall Street*. It is this action that is decisive for the hero's ultimate choice, leading to the dénouement.
- 6. The young man destroys the Bad Father, as an act of protest and moral outrage. Again, this is literal in *Platoon* (Chris shoots Berenger), financial in *Wall Street*. An important difference: in the latter film Gekko has been exposed, but we cannot be certain the he has been effectively destroyed; we also know that other Gekkos will take his place, that nothing has been radically changed. Bud's future, presumably, will be to follow in the footsteps of his father, non-corrupt but impotent.

This is not an attempt to reduce the films to Oedipal conflicts and obliterate their political thrust, a common enough practice of contemporary criticism: far from it. The overall pattern can be extended to the other films that lack the obvious father/son dramatization, whereupon it becomes clear that Stone's Bad Father is American capitalism/imperialism in its current stage of evolution, the Good Father embodying various possible (but never effective) alternatives to it. It is because Stone grapples in his films so directly with vast and pressing political issues that his work expresses, with remarkable vividness and force, the quandary of the left-wing American intellectual: the only practicable and effective alternative that political theory has so far devised is some form of

Marxist-based socialism, and in America (and especially on the level of popular culture and the mass media, which are determined and controlled by wealth) that alternative is tabu: not only can it not be mentioned (except of course derogatively) — it must not even be thought. This defines, I think, the essential character of Stone's work: it is balanced precariously on the borderline between furious and impassioned protest and an all-but-overwhelming despair (obviously, when despair becomes complete, protest becomes irrelevant). For me, and I think for many radicals and would-be radicals today, this implicit, undermining fear that protest may no longer be of the least use, that the battles are already lost, touches on a very vulnerable and painful nerve.

While Platoon and Wall Street are not the Stone movies I most admire, they offer opportunities for saluting his most admirable quality: audacity, and the magnificent aplomb with which he brings off things one would have supposed were tabu. I never expected to see a Hollywood movie that not only condones but celebrates a soldier's deliberate execution of his own sergeant - and not in a disreputable little 'exploitation' movie, but in the kind of prestigious production that gets honoured with Academy Awards. Wall Street is even more remarkable in this respect. Roland Barthes in Mythologies coined the word 'exnomination' to signify bourgeois capitalism's principle of camouflaging its grossness by suppressing the terms that name it: if 'socialism' is a tabu word in Hollywood cinema, then so is 'capitalism.' I can testify personally to the reality of this. I was once interviewed over the phone by a journalist from one of Toronto's leading newspapers. After one of my responses there was a short pause, then the voice came: 'Do we have to use the word capitalist?' I asked what word I could use that would replace it while keeping the same sense; there was another short pause and the journalist passed on to the next question. The interview did not make it into print. Wall Street not only uses the word 'capitalism' but defines it in all its monstrousness, and this not by implication but explicitly, in the dialogue. Stone's strategy for getting away with this is superb in its combination of nerve and circumspection. All the really devastating speeches -

The illusion becomes real. And the more real it becomes, the more desperately they want it. Capitalism at its finest.'

'The richest one-per-cent of this country owns half our country's wealth.'

'You're not naive enough to think we're living in a democracy, are you?'

— are put into the mouth of the film's arch-capitalist and arch-villain Gekko (Can the Devil speak true?). There is of course a price to be paid: the audience can reflect, and with some justification, 'Well, it's this Bad Guy saying all these things, and he's been discredited, right? The film isn't against capitalism, it's against people like Gekko who abuse the system. Good guys like Charlie Sheen's dad live within it and try to make it work better.' It is, however, quite impossible to

imagine an alternative version of the film getting made — evading unofficial censorship — in which the identical speeches were given to Martin Sheen, in whose mouth they would be perfectly appropriate.

It seems logical to move (achronologically) from *Platoon* and *Wall Street* to Stone's third movie centred on a young and initially innocent protagonist, *Born on the Fourth of July*, which takes both him and (through identification) the audience on a similar journey from innocence to experience and ends on what (within the terms of the movie) appears a more convincingly positive note. But I want to approach the film deviously, via a digression on the treatment of women in Stone's work, a digression on *The Hand*, and the complex, perhaps confused, attitude to masculinity manifested in the films — the major issues of sexual politics that must be seen in close relation to the more overt (not necessarily more important) political concerns.

It will be generally agreed that women do not come off very strongly or positively in Stone's five recent films, the characterizations being for the most part either perfunctory or hostile. This should be seen first in the context of post-'70s Hollywood, which is not simply male dominated (as was always the case) but masculinist-dominated. This is obviously enough on the level of the 'action' film and its overwhelming popularity - Rocky, Rambo, Indiana Jones, the prestige of stars like Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Norris, the 'Return to Vietnam' movies, the 'Lethal Weapon' films. But it is equally true on the level of the increasingly rare instances of distinguished achievement: the work of Scorsese and Cimono, and of de Palma since he abandoned the Hitchcock connection, is pervasively male-centred and male identified. In their best work this tendency can become transformed into a critique of masculinity, in which the women's roles, while subordinate, become crucial (Raging Bull is of course the locus classicus). We may note that Stone has worked, as screenwriter, with both Cimino and de Palma, and in both cases the women's roles (while still subordinate) intermittently achieve (perhaps through the actors' performances) a force and resonance they generally lack in Stone's work: see Michelle Pfeiffer in Scarface and Caroline Cava in Year of the Dragon. The phenomenon is so widespread that we tend to take it for granted, almost as a fact of nature; it is worth remembering that this was not always the case, and that the contemporary Hollywood cinema can offer no equivalent for a Sternberg, an Ophuls, a Cukor, a Minelli, or even for the deep ambivalence of a Hitchcock (through de Palma at his rare best came close). It is also to be regretted that the initially very promising careers of a number of women directors in the '70's have amounted to so little (or much worse, in the case of Amy Heckerling).

Salvador reproduces, with only minimal variation, the typical '80s figuration: there is the Good Woman (James Wood's Salvadorean lover), initially self-assertive, but quickly revealing herself to be the helpless, dependent female, whose only real strength lies in her role of mother; and the Bad Woman (a television journalist), strong and independent but also thoroughly obtuse, opportunistic and conscienceless. The Good

Woman's function as mother is conceived only in the most trite, conventional way. The third significant female character, the social worker who is raped and murdered by a 'death squad,' has the potential to transcend this simplistic opposition, but her role is too undeveloped to fulfill such a function. Women scarcely figure in Platoon. Daryl Hannah in Wall Street is a variant on the TV journalist in Salvador, more elaborated but scarcely more complex, genuinely attracted to the hero but unable to follow him in his progress to moral integrity at the cost of a lucrative career. Some regard (I think wrongly) the high school girlfriend of Born on the Fourth of July in the same light: initially committed to the protagonist, she abandons him when he is crippled and impotent. I shall say for the moment that I don't think the film blames her for this: Stone is certainly not so naive as to suggest that a young, healthy, active women should sacrifice herself in such a way. Only in Talk Radio do the women directly challenge the male protagonist, achieving a certain force and autonomy, though that is also compromised in various ways.

Prior to Born on the Fourth of July, mothers figure little in the films. The male protagonists of Salvador, Platoon, and Talk Radio don't have them (Chris in Platoon writes letters to his grandmother); Bud Fox's mother (Wall Street) suddenly appears for about a minute three quarters of the way through the film in a hospital scene when her husband has a heart attack - unless I missed something, she is not even mentioned earlier. It is interesting, then, that so much of the blame for Ron Kovic's tragedy is heaped upon his mother. I don't think the films supply enough evidence for one to assert that this is something personal to Stone (it may derive largely from the source material), but it is not inconsistent with the apparent inability to identify with a female position manifested in the other films. The attitude to masculinity (which seems as pertinent to the films' underlying desperation as their inability to define or embrace any viable political alternative to capitalism) is clearly the corollary of this.

But at this point it is relevant to consider *The Hand*, the first film Stone both wrote and directed, a film that seems far more interesting, and far more nearly successful, now than when I saw it on its release in 1981. It obviously represents a 'false start' to the career that Stone has subsequently chosen to develop (five years separate it from Stone's next film as director, *Salvador*, and it is the only one of his movies that lacks an overtly political thematic), but its very explicit concern with masculinity and sexual politics relates strikingly to the later work (if not in any obvious way), suggesting a very different direction the career might have taken.

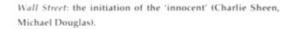
I initially rejected the film on the grounds that it began as a serious Project, lost confidence, and proceeded uneasily to send itself up. Re-viewing it on video in the privacy of my home, I realize I feebly permitted myself to be misled by the audience's reaction, their scornful laughter colouring my perception. The film's problem is that it doesn't work on the superficial level of visceral horror that audiences have been conditioned to demand: as an object of terror, a severed hand cannot compete with Jason, Michael and Freddy. On the conceptual level, the film is intelligent, logically thought through, and consistently serious. It is singlemindedly, and very consciously, concerned with masculinity, the male ego, and cas-

tration anxiety. It is also very critical of the masculinist position, and (although centred on a male consciousness) contains perhaps the two most convincingly and sympathetically realized active female characters in all of Stone's work to date. It would certainly be worth reviving: there is absolutely no reason why Stone and Michael Caine should feel embarrassed (see the entry in that self-appointed oracle of contemporary popular taste, Leonard Maltin's TV Movies).

The film sustains almost until the end that hesitation between a rational and supernatural explanation that Todorov saw as the defining characteristic of 'the Fantastic;' when it finally opts for the rational, this proves in retrospect to be satisfyingly logical, and signalled at many points by the use of cinematic devices (such as the use of monochrome for the hand's first murder - the derelict who has shouted abuse at Caine/Ion Lansdale - which we are to see as Lansdale's wish-fulfillment fantasy). From the beginning, the film establishes Lansdale's right hand as the symbolic phallus. It represents his professional power - he is the author of a comicstrip which he both writes and draws - but much more: the hero of the comic-strip, Mandro, is clearly his fantasy alter ego, an all-powerful, invincible 'superman' who, in the episode on which we see him working, is essaying the rescue of his ideal woman in order to make her his queen. For Lansdale, it is the act of drawing the fantasy that renders it real, validating it; as he draws, we see the signet ring on his finger prominently

bearing his initials, his identity. In close parallel to this, we learn that his wife is struggling, with considerable trepidation (she knows her husband), not necessarily to separate from him (that is how he interprets it), but to assert her right to her own career and her own space: she wants to move to New York, leaving him in the country but spending time with him every week. They are still fighting about this when his hand is severed at the wrist, and mysteriously disappears, in a driving accident (she is driving). The whole film (its weakness, perhaps, is that its scope is more that of the anecdote than of the developed work) grows logically out of this premise.

Lansdale's agent enlists the aid of a promising younger artist to realize graphically Lansdale's concepts. The young man (clearly not untouched by the women's movement and the gender concerns of the '70s) tries to modify Mandro's phallic power. Lansdale is furious: 'You don't cut the balls off Superman.' His ego requires, above all, the submission, subordination, and sexual fidelity, of women. He contemptuously rejects the suggestion that he seek psychiatric help, on the grounds that looking inside oneself is a weakening experience. The film moves, through the murder of his young lover, a female student, and the attempted murder of his wife, to the postscript in which he murders the female psychiatrist (Viveca Lindfors) who is probing beneath his consciousness — believing all the time that the crimes have been committed by the returning severed hand, absolving himself of all







Talk Radio: the embattled radical (Eric Bogosian).

responsibility. In its singleminded exposure of the presumption, arrogance and vulnerability of the socially constructed male ego, *The Hand* can certainly be claimed for the small category of feminist horror films.

In this it stands alone in Stone's work — to the extent that re-seeing it after exposure to the later works comes as something of a shock, and a salutary one. It seems that, for Stone, the feminist concern became overwhelmed by his sense of the urgency of directly political issues, and he has yet to succeed in integrating the two. Yet such an integration may still be feasible: the fascination with masculinity-as-social-construct, submerged in the intervening films where male competitiveness and aggression seem generally taken for granted (though not endorsed), resurfaces in a different but very interesting form in Born on the Fourth of July.

The first 'movement' of the film — up to the transition to Vietnam — is devoted almost exclusively to describing how masculinity is constructed in American culture, linking it to power, conquest, aggression, patriotism on the one hand and repression on the other. The children's war games are juxtaposed with the film's first Fourth of July parade; the concept of 'manliness' is defined in terms of physical prowess and the total subjugation of the body to the will. When the young Ron Kovic is kissed on the lips by a childhood sweetheart, his instant response is to boast about his pushups. All-male sports are linked to violent physical training (accompanied by savage exhortations to 'kill') and competitiveness. The aim of true manhood is to be 'the best:' Mrs. Kovic's proud comment

on her son ('He wants to be the best') is echoed in the marine's recruiting speech in senior high school ('We want the best — nothing but the best'). The students are seduced to enlist by the alluring promise of 'thirteen weeks of Hell' to find out 'if you really are a man.' All these institutionalized pressures, ratified by notions of morality and honour, are linked in turn to the automatic and unreflecting spouting of patriotic and anti-Communist catch-phrases: 'Better dead then Red,' fears of attack by 'Cuban missiles.' Capping it all, setting upon the construct the final seal of divine approval, is the mother's commitment to Catholicism: 'Communism has to be stopped. It's God's will you're doing'.

It is in this context that the complaint that the film is hostile to women — or at least unfair in its treatment of them has to be considered. Allowing for the fact that, like all Stone's films to date, the film is firmly male-centred, permitting little empathy or identification with a female position, I think the complaint is unjustified. It certainly is in the case of Donna/Kyra Sedgwick: far from blaming her for not devoting herself sacrificially to a castrated cripple (her response to Ron's pathetic attempt to lure her back into a romantic relationship is 'I'm sorry about what happened to you, Ronny,' the humane but carefully realistic reminder), the film presents her as crucial to his subsequent progress, suggesting clearly that (a) what happened to him is partly responsible for her own commitment to political activism, and (b) it is her guidance and encouragement that set him on the road to a similar commitment, acceptance of his condition, and the consequent

recovery of a sense of dignity and self-worth.

Blame is of course attached to Ron's mother (Caroline Cava), the dominant figure in the family in a way generally recognized as characteristically 'American.' Yet this cannot be simply interpreted as betraying an animus against women or against mothers in the abstract: Mrs. Kovic is placed firmly within a social environment and viewed as its product. She becomes, among other things, a means of attacking the influence of the Catholic church, its dogma feeding into and nourishing the dogma of patriotism. She is a woman who has given herself totally to the cult of masculinity (in this she is strongly contrasted with Donna), whilst violently repudiating any reference to its sexual aspects (the word 'penis' must not be uttered in her house). True, the film attached personal blame to her, but is this really objectionable? The nervous feeling that it is somehow wrong, because of women's oppression, to ascribe any blame whatever to a woman seems to me dangerous: to deny women any degree of personal responsibility for their words and actions appears more insulting than enlightened, and may be yet another manifestation of the patriarchal myth of 'the helpless female.'

The treatment of Ron's castration is direct and explicit, but also very sensitive. The film's critical enquiry into masculinity requires a careful, complex distinction between the Phallus (a monstrous, oppressive and profoundly mystified symbolic construct) and the penis (a widely valued and useful human organ). Mrs. Kovic, one might say, worships the Phallus while denying that the penis exists; Ron sees his personal tragedy primarily in terms of the loss of the penis, his awareness that he will never be able to relate to a woman sexually. The film is also clear that the distinction can never be absolute, in a culture in which it has been blurred and mystified for untold centuries: with the loss of the penis goes inevitably a loss of a sense of worth, a deep humiliation, and it is this that Ron must learn to overcome. This is his achievement at the end of the film. He is about to address the American public as a political activist, publicly presenting himself as a castrated figure, and denouncing the Phallus-worship (what I called above the 'cult of masculinity') on which American culture is built and which the film has so thoroughly analysed. This is clinched by the film's culminating irony: that Ron is fulfilling his mother's dream of him 'speaking to a large crowd and saying great things,' but fulfilling it by denouncing the very values on which she built her life.

In the last issue of this magazine I attempted to distinguish between art and agitprop in terms of their different functions, and added that the distinction can never be complete because in many works the functions combine or overlap. Stone's films offer an excellent example of this: they aspire to the completeness, the complexity, the thought-throughness of art together with the topicality, the urgency, the desire to engage directly with audiences in the promotion of immediate social change, that characterize agitprop (the fiction/documentary dichotomy is closely related to this). It is clearly very important to Stone to believe that he is contributing to public awareness and popular activism, and the alleged defects of the films - bludgeoning, obviousness, 'spelling things out' are the direct consequence of this. The problem to which I am pointing here should be of immediate interest to

CincAction's editors, contributors and readers: from the outset, we proposed to appeal to a wider audience than that addressed by most of our intellectual and academic film journals, an enterprise in which our success might be charitably regarded as 'dubious' (I would be less charitable, though any practicable solution continues to evade me). It is in any case a problem to which I relate personally, as I am also often accused (quite justly, from the point of view of the accusers) of 'spelling things out" too much. My eye detects an example as close as the preceding paragraph, where I see I have written '... Phallus worship (what I called above the cult of masculinity)...' I imagine that most of the readers of CineAction whose names and addresses figure in our subscription lists groan when they come upon something like that, inwardly muttering some such comment as 'My God, who does he think we are?' But consider the more casual reader who picks up the magazine in a bookstore (attracted, perhaps, by the cover or some of the stills, or intrigued by the titles of the articles) - someone uninitiated in the Freudian psychoanalytic tradition that has been such a pervasive presence in the serious film criticism of the past two decades. His/her reaction might be quite other: 'Oh, is that what all this stuff about the Phallus is about?'. In many ways I identify strongly with the problems Stone confronts and the tensions - perhaps excesses - to which they give rise. With an audience as heterogeneous as the one Stone seeks to address (or even the one we idealistically hoped CineAction might reach), there is no question of modulating the form of address to suit the occasion: he is trying to communicate on urgent issues with people from all classes, all social and ethnic groups, all levels of education, and to make what he has to say as comprehensible as possible to all of them. So, at the end of Born on the Fourth of July, when, just before Ron Kovic exits from the film to deliver the climactic speech we never get to hear, Stone cuts in a memory-flashback of Mrs. Kovic's speech about her dream, I am far less offended than a number of my film scholar colleagues, who feel insulted by it: they would prefer to be left to make such connections themselves. But isn't it possible that many spectators who have not spent the last ten years or more consciously analysing movies with their students would miss it? (After all, it's separated by two hours of running time and a great deal of action and emotion). Need we see the inclusion of the flashback as condescending, or should we rather accept it as realistic, even considerate?

As to the hypothetical social effect of the film: the deadline for articles set by the editors of this issue if January 15th, which happens also to be the fateful day when President Bush's ultimatum to Iraq expires. At time of writing (and I hereby promise not to alter this passage in the proofs, with the knowledge of hindsight) it is not certain what is going to happen, though if war is averted it will come as a surprise. I shall say simply that one can surely speculate that the strong and widespread popular opposition to the idea of 'another Vietnam' - to which Kovic's book and Stone's film have undoubtedly made significant if not statistically definable contributions - has been a crucial factor in restraining the Bush administration (despite the President's transparent eagerness) for so long, from plunging America and perhaps the world into another unnecessary and fundamentally imperialist war. A pessimist could of course put it the other way: despite the strong and widespread popular opposition...the Bush administration...' etc...

Born on the Fourth of July and Salvador are linked by a shared 'key' moment crucial to the Stone dilemma: in both films the protagonist exclaims, at a climactic point in the action, 'I love America' (in Salvador, 'I love my country'). The line, in its context, evokes the same question that is raised by the singing of 'God Bless America' at the end of The Deer Hunter: given what has gone before, exactly what America are we to believe the protagonist loves or God is being invited to bless? (The Deer Hunter may be an important influence on Born on the Fourth of July: the transition from America to Vietnam is achieved very similarly in both films, Stone substituting 'Moon River' and heterosexual romance for Cimino's Chopin and homoeroticism). The only 'America' that is validated in The Deer Hunter is an ethnic community whose values and traditions have been irreparably eroded by the 'progress' of mainstream American civilization. The 'America' loved by Richard Boyle/James Woods and Ron Kovic/Tom Cruise seems even less clearly definable. Certainly, the contemporary America and all it stands for (capitalism, imperialism, the nuclear family, the enslavement of a supposedly 'free' people by constant and pervasive conditioning and manipulation) has been discredited in Stone's work with a thoroughness and clarity of which Cimono seems incapable. What links Stone and Cimino, giving them at once their stature and the problematic nature of their work, is the desire to affirm; because Stone is by far the more intellectually rigorous of the two, refusing to hide his quandaries under incoherence, the underlying desperation, the sense that there is nothing left within the culture to affirm, is much closer to the surface, much more nearly recognized for what it is, much more threatening (see Talk Radio). The 'America' of Ford or Capra, perhaps? - but their own films have testified very eloquently to its unrealizability. The idea of America embodied in the Constitution, or in the famous words of Lincoln? There, precisely, lies the quandary, in another, only slightly different form: it is obvious that 'government of the people, by the people and for the people' could only be realized in a form of Marxist socialism, which is strictly tabu... (The so-called 'democracy' of American capitalism - 'You're not naive enough to think that we're living in a democracy, are you? - is government by the rich and powerful for the rich and powerful, as the Reagan and Bush administrations have demonstrated with unsurpassable thoroughness). The line 'I love America' seems to mean, taken it its context (the context of the entire oeuvre so far): 'I love an America that doesn't exist, has never existed, and can never exist unless we restructure the entire social/political system to which the term 'America' normally refers, in ways that most Americans have been taught to regard as anathema." Hence Salvador accompanies its effective demolition of everything 'America' has come to signify with an explicit rejection

I have left Salvador and Talk Radio to the end for a number of reasons, of which the paramount one is that I regard them as Stone's two most satisfying and most completely successful films to date. They are set apart from the other three films by two interconnected features: they are centred on protagonists who are far from 'innocent,' and their conclusions are uncompromisingly bleak, with neither the somewhat suspect satisfactions of *Platoon* and *Wall Street* (the bad guys get their comeuppance) nor the more convincingly earned optimism of *Born on the Fourth of July*.

For all its central flaw, Salvador strikes me as an exemplary political movie. In saying this I am assuming that there is no such thing as an 'ideal' political film in the abstract, no formula that would guarantee political 'correctness' and efficacy. To 'make a film politically' one must forget theory and be realistically aware of one's audience and how they can be reached - the form of address to which they might be expected to attend. If you wish to address, not just a tiny revolutionary elite, but a vast and heterogeneous general public, then you make Salvador, not Wind from the East (nor even, alas, Tout Va Bien). The film is consistently intelligent in its strategies and choices. The distinction between 'reality' and 'fiction' is deliberately blurred right from the outset, in the presentation of the protagonist: we accept him as a fictitious character called Richard Boyle, played by a recognizable actor, James Woods, but we know (because we have just read it in the credits) that the real Richard Boyle worked with Oliver Stone on the screenplay and that the film is based on his experiences. Thus a provisional sense of 'truth' is established: we know that what we are watching is being offered as, in a sense, 'true,' but that this truth has been fictionalized, i.e. it is coming to us from, and coloured by, definable narrators (Boyle, Stone) with their own point of view. In most respects Stone is the antithesis of a Brechtian filmmaker, opting for the strongest emotional involvement, yet it seems to me clear that in watching Salvador we are perfectly aware that 'truth' is being presented as much as represented. The film demonstrates, in fact, that the opposition of those terms is not entirely clearcut or absolute. This is confirmed throughout by Stone's use of the 'documentary' device of printed captions to identify 'real' historical personages (who are also actors, at least some of whom such as Michael Murphy - are familiar to us), dates and places: the captions both confirm for us that what we are being shown is 'true' and act as a distancing device, an interruption of the fiction, to 'present' that truth.

If Boyle/Woods is an ideal identification-figure, it is precisely because he is so far from being 'ideal' that identification can never be complete. He is our means of entry into an alien world: with him we go to Salvador, and with him we learn, step by painful step, the realities of the political situation there. However un-Brechtian in its direct emotional assault, in the all-but-overwhelming involvement into which we are drawn, the film's every sequence constitutes a 'history lesson.' Our identification with Boyle is countered from the start by our awareness of his egotism, his manipulativeness, his total lack of scruples; he is the medium through which the film's powerful emotional thrust is fused successfully with its equally consistent didacticism. At the outset, Boyle is motivated primarily by this cynical desire for a 'story' that will reestablish his credibility as a journalist - though we are also made aware that his position is well to the Left and that he is

ready to expose himself to the most dangerous circumstances. The lessons we learn with him - which add up to a comprehensive analysis of the political situation and the hypocrisy and wickedness of American intervention - are above all lessons in the necessity for total commitment, which must be both intellectual and emotional. It is not a weakness that this commitment becomes increasingly coloured by the personal and specific (Boyle's progressive involvement with Maria and determination to save her and her children from the death squads, an aspect of the film we read as fictitious but which is continuously juxtaposed with the documentary reconstruction of actual historical events - the assassination of Romero, the rape and murder of visiting Nicaraguan nuns). Or it is a weakness only in some never-never land of theoretical 'correctness' where actual conditions of production and reception can be conveniently ignored: the strategy again demonstrated Stone's realistic awareness of the audience he is addressing and the conventions and narrative patterns to which it is accustomed. It also makes possible the film's devastating coup de grâce. Hollywood has long habituated us to the notion that, while terrible injustices take place elsewhere, America, the 'land of the free,' is always there as a place of safety and asylum to welcome the oppressed. In Stone's film, Maria and her children are intercepted at the border as aliens, and sent back to their probable deaths.

Talk Radio has generally been treated as a minor, marginal work belonging more to Eric Bogosian than to Oliver Stone; I find it, on the contrary, central to Stone's work almost to the point of being confessional. It might be regarded as at once the opposite and complement of Born on the Fourth of July: the full expression of the dark, desperate, despairing feelings that the later film manages successfully to assuage. The juxtaposition may remind us that the value of an auterist approach lies not only in showing how a given artist's films support and confirm each other by thematic and stylistic consistency, but how they qualify each other, expressing conflicting but related impulses.

Stone found in Bogosian (both as writer and performer) the perfect 'objective correlative' for the darker side of his artistic personality. The Stone embodied in the films is an artist of far greater intelligence, integrity and maturity than Barry Champlain (Bogosian's character in the film), with a far more developed sense of responsibility in his attitude both to the public and to women. Yet it is this very distance — the fact that Stone cannot be simply identified with Champlain — that makes it possible for the 'correlative' to be 'objective,' and one cannot doubt that Champlain represents for Stone a dark *alter ego*, stared at unflinchingly yet as unflinchingly staring back.

The material enables Stone to confront directly the artistic problems implicit in the method and style of his other films: centrally, the problem of the relationship between a radical artist and the public in a deeply reactionary age. One may cite the moment in *Born on the Fourth of July* when Ron Kovic attempts to state a position of radical protest at a political rally: the government 'tricked them (the soldiers) into going 13,000 miles to fight a war against a poor peasant people with a proud history of resistance, who have been struggling for their own independence for a thousand years. I can't find the

words to express how the leadership of this government sickens me...' The speech (which as far as I am aware transcends anything that has been said about Vietnam in any Hollywood movie, the rest being content to base their protest on the discovery that the war was traumatic for 'our boys') is swiftly and forcibly suppressed, yet beyond the fear of direct suppression one senses a greater fear: that people won't hear because they won't listen, or even because they can't listen any more. The auditors of Barry Champlain's talk show (those, at least, who phone in) fall into three sometimes overlapping categories: they are either so neurotic that they are incapable of hearing anything but echoes of their own disorder, so brainwashed that they hear only what they want to hear (which may be the direct opposite of what is being said, or merely irrelevant to it), or so bigoted that they can respond only with unthinking and furious rejection. One might say that what the film offers is a nightmare vision of the public that re-elected Ronald Reagan. Champlain's diagnosis ('This country is in deep trouble...') clearly goes far beyond Ron Kovic's attack on 'the leadership of this government,' but for that very reason it cannot be taken seriously: it is easier to blame a specific administration than the entire social system of which you are a member. Underlying the film is the fear that the medium has indeed become the message, that it no longer makes any difference what you say because it is all received as 'entertainment.' So long as you identify clearly for the audience who are the good guys and who are the bad guys, it doesn't matter what positions they represent, and Platoon, and Rambo become interchangeable as 'exciting action movies' (one can find them side by side on the shelves of video stores in the 'Action/Adventure' section). Champlain's radicalism (complete tolerance for all minorities, blacks, jews, homosexuals; the legislation of drugs; etc...) is received either as titillation or the pretext for conservative rage. Its rational basis is undercut by the hysteria of its expression, facilitating its recuperation as 'entertainment.'

Talk Radio stands apart from all Stone's other films (except, arguably, The Hand) in the total bleakness of its ending. Bleak as the ending of Salvador is, at least we are presented with the protagonist's moral redemption, whereas Talk Radio chronicles Champlain's progressive disintegration. On the verge of hysteria from the outset, he moves inexorably to the impotent, nihilistic diatribe of his climactic denunciation of his entire audience, implicit in which is his despair at ever reaching anyone. After which, there is nothing left for him but to die at the hands of one of his outraged and alienated listeners (we never know which one and it doesn't matter). The film's complexity of effect is summed up in the ambivalence: we register the killing both as the American public's rejection of any radical position and as an almost justifiable execution. It is the most painful and disturbing of Stone's films to date, perhaps because it deals so directly with his most pressingly immediate problems. One should end by reiterating, however, that Stone is not Barry Champlain, and that Talk Radio represents only one aspect of the complex impulses at work in his films.

One looks forward eagerly to his forthcoming movie on Jim Morrison and The Doors, and to his projected work on the assassination of John F. Kennedy.



Writing Feminist Histories

THE BURNING TIMES AND
THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

by Janine Marchessault

The stress on diverse experiences of gender oppression, on a plurality of women's identities, is one of the most striking characteristics of recent feminist films produced in Canada. Studio D's recent innovation *Five Feminist Minutes*, a feature made up of sixteen short films by women, is a good example.

Ranging from Shawna Dempsey's wonderful music video parody We're Talking Vulva to Gwendolyn's Prowling by Night (created with a number of prostitutes about police harassment), Five Feminist Minutes is a significant attempt to move feminist filmmaking beyond the aesthetic category of 'women's cinema' into the political realm of the women's movement. The film responds directly to the pressures of a dominant culture that marginalized feminist discourse and politics into a 'genre' well served by its so-called liberal democratic structures—a marginalization that Studio D understands only too well. As Rina Fraticelli, the film's Executive Producer, has pointed out: it is feminism's task to enlarge the women's movement, to set up coalitions with other struggles and to make the category of gender open to a plurality of experiences.

The Burning Times by Donna Read and The Company of Strangers by Cynthia Scott, also recent National Film Board productions, do just that. Building on the consciousness-raising verite documentaries of early feminist filmmaking, both films depend on commonalities between women and on discrete experience as the ground for a political plurality. Each takes as its point of departure the myriad experiences of women in a particular socio-historic context without privileging any one voice. The burning of witches in the Middle Ages

and the personal histories recounted by an older generation of women in 1990 are always specific without being empirical, calling upon the particular without making it singular. As feminist historiographies, they confront and redefine the real rather than deconstructing the limitations of realism, combining assured innovation with a degree of transparency.

I am particularly interested in both films because they highlight, differently, the plight of older women within the patriarchal society. The subject of women and aging, until recently (especially Yvonne Rainer's *Privilege*), has not been addressed critically. While *The Burning Times* does so indirectly, it allows us to understand the unique achievement and courage of *The Company of Strangers*, a film about seven women 'of age.'

Read sets the stage for this recognition through her daring investigation of 15th and 16th century witch hunts. Making links between the Church, the State and the continued oppression of women, she brings to the fore the female holocaust that took place in Europe, the Americas and Africa over a period of one hundred years. Through trial records, the famous inquisitors' handbook *Malleus Maleficarum*, letters written by condemned women, and interviews with feminist scholars and historians, the film outlines a shift in power relations imposed by the Church and the State: away from the mid-wife towards the doctor, away from the local wise women or clan mother towards the priest.

Remarkable about The Burning Times is the link it makes with the present. Read begins in the present and works backwards to trace the ideological roots of specific images and words connotating a profound fear of women. The threat of women is not simply the threat of difference grounded psychoanalytically in her castration. It is the real danger that forms of knowledge, skills and matriarchal power posed to the growing rationalization of science and the State in Renaissance Society. The "hag," once signifying a women with sacred knowledge, a women necessarily advanced in years and experience, becomes a figure of ridicule and hatred. The relation of aging to ugliness and youth to beauty that patriarchal culture sets up as an order of identity, depends entirely upon making older women dysfunctional, inconsequential and worthless; a move that attempts to neutralize the potential threat they might pose. The possibility of existing separately from men, of setting up communities outside the boundaries of the Church and the State was by the end of the Classical period to be obliterated.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault describes the emergence of a science that would adapt the ancient truth-producing techniques of the confession to the empirical needs of scientific discourse. As a precursor to this science, Francis Bacon would speak of teasing the secrets from nature as the *Malleus Maleficarum* had extracted the truth from witches. The secrets of nature, fused with the secrets of the female body, were to be colonized—nature became wild, women were made hysterical.

Read's documentary is far-reaching: it connects the oppression of women as a group during this period to current struggles over female sexuality and reproductive rights. The number of deaths in Europe, estimated at 9,000,000 people—85% women—is linked to continued violence against women.

The Burning Times is more mythical than empirical, more utopian than factual. It combines voice-over narration, interviews and lyrical images in ways that remind us there can be no return, no complete recuperation of this lost history. Yet it is this lost history which stands as a possibility, a utopian ideal that might unite women beyond the boundaries of their recognized differences. Unlike the celebrated uncertainty of Studio B's Candid Eye films, Read's analytical skills embrace a feminist notion of authority; some things—like the power relations that patriarchal capitalism fosters—are certain.

The many sites of burning that the film visits are peopled with tourists, imbued with the amnesia imposed by the State and its science of forgetting. Though we can never recover this history entirely (which was predominantly an oral one), Read makes an important contribution to a feminist historiography—it is not that women have no history but that a vital part of it has been decimated.

The Company of Strangers makes a similar point. The title refers not only to the diegetic contours of the film but also to the fact that older women are strangers to the screen; rarely are they seen as suitable or interesting subject matter and so often are their stories lost to the passage of time. Cynthia Scott attempts to halt this passage briefly. Based on a loosely scripted screenplay by the late Gloria Demers (whose wonderful talents are only just being discovered), the film weaves the personal accounts of seven women into a delicately accentuated narrative. Framing the real drama drawn from the women's lives against the lush beauty of Quebec's northern landscape, the story is simple: seven elderly women go for an afternoon bus ride in the country; a detour taken in search of an elusive childhood homestead leaves them stranded when the bus breaks down and their young driver sprains her ankle (ironically she is the one who must sport the cane). The women take shelter in an abandoned farmhouse, forced to cope with sparse living conditions, no food and each other for the next three days.

The plot's 'desert island' pretence is an old one that so often has served to prop-up reactionary tales about human nature and survival generally focussed around men. For Demers and Scott, it serves merely as narrative pretext. Obvious and elegant in its structure, the story-line unifies the various disjointed exchanges between the women. Indeed, the most widely circulated commentary on the film has emphasized its lack of dramatic conflict. Despite the fact that the premise fuels none of the expected friction, none of the power struggles between the strong and the weak, it does not detract from the interest we have in the characters. It is, however, difficult to situate how precisely this interest is generated.

Based on interviews undertaken with the seven women, the script is anecdotal rather then dramatic. The snippets of conversation that pass between the women relate few dark secrets; they consist, rather, of mundane observations, polite banter and superficial recollections of children, lovers and work. Indeed, there is nothing astounding about the women, and though their plight is unique, it is treated in the most banal way, with no real sense of urgency.

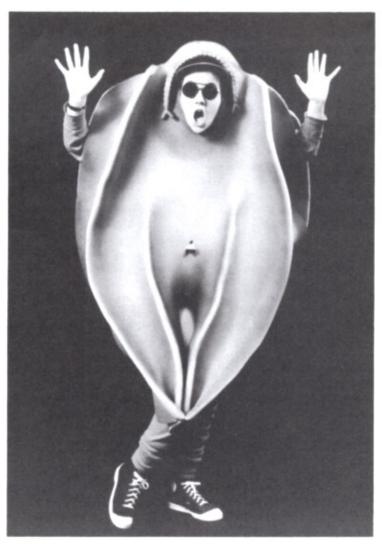
Our engagement with the film derives in part, I believe, from Scott's insistence that it be about "people who are old" and not about "old people." This approach has meant eliding

exposition and avoiding the over-determination of 'old people' as a category to be revealed. The Company of Strangers is unique in its refusal to impose romantic ideals or to narrativize the wisdom that comes with age (lest we forget the neonate logic of the elderly in Cocoon or of women in Hollywood's recent cortege of women's films). The film refuses the linearity of classical drama as it does the often ambiguous empiricism of the verite documentary. As hybrid it balances carefully between the two, never entirely revealing, never entirely concealed.

In their choice of the women to be included in the film, Scott and Demers have managed a wide dramatic spectrum: a nun who is into cars, a lesbian painter, a Mohawk woman who dreams of falling in love, a woman from Dorset who has recovered from compete

paralysis and another never recovered from the untimely death of her only son. The rich cast of characters, the documentary nuances of their lives, the lack of dramatic action and conflict, along with the pastoral beauty of the landscape might indeed make this film typically Canadian—that is, a film about life in Canada that is "true, fine and full of meaning" as Wolf Koenig has described it.

While the film is full of meaning, Scott does not let it stand as organic ethnography; its structural simplicity reveals a rare sophistication of dramatic means. The film opens with a white screen that dissolves into a morning mist through which the figures of the women emerge. Single file through a field, they make their way towards us as if in a dream. The same mist will reappear at the end of the film, enveloping the women and saturating the screen in whiteness. There is then, no real point of departure and no clear destination. The film opens in the middle of nowhere and this is where it will end. By framing the film in white, Scott conveys a history unwritten. Like the landscapes which embody at once the artifice of the narrative and the natural beauty of the location, history's dialectic is played out both as impossibility and absolute necessity.



We're Talking Vulva, by Shawna Dempsey

Cutting them off from their previous contexts, from the continuity of their lives, Scott isolates and stages the women's partly improvised dialogues against magnificent landscapes. The skillfully executed scenes between the women take on greater and greater meaning as the narrative unfolds. The emotional intensity of these interactions is created almost entirely through the juxtaposition of conversations in which we encounter each woman differently, each pair of characters imparting a completely different social dynamic. Cissie, for example, appears cheerful and strong with most of the women, yet when she is alone with Alice, she suddenly confides her profound fear of economic destitution. This works not only to give us insight into Cissie's fears which Alice shares, but also foregrounds Alice's sensitivity and kindness.

Constance, on the other hand, reveals nothing of herself to others but when unaccompanied, communicated her extraordinary will through an unflinching gaze across the lake. It is not so much what is said but perhaps what cannot be said that lends the film its tremendous complexity and precision. The delicate rhythms of nature are mirrored in the subtle developments and gestures that take place between the women; gestures, it should be noted, which are clearly demarcated by class and ethnic background.

The Company of Strangers provides us with a wonderful collection of details, of exchanges which are always involving because they turn on the shared experiences of women whose lives have been so different. This is precisely why the group scenes are reserved for song, dance and the exchange of food—for pleasures of a social kind which convey a strong sense of community and celebration.

The three day recess among strangers is what the women were searching for from the start: a chance to recollect elusive memories. (While the homestead belonging to Constance is never actually found, the farmhouse permeated with the past serves the purpose.) The series of personal photographs that Scott cuts intermittently into the flow of images, call forth—



briefly and fleetingly-each woman's past. There is, between the photograph of a young woman

and its traces in the body of an older woman, a sea of years and knowledge that cannot be summarized. As Roland Barthes put it in Camera Lucida, this is the terrain of history: "History is hysterical, it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it-and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it." This is the effect of distance and the desire for proximity that The Company of Strangers successfully imparts. Isolated details and conversations, woven together through the narrative, serve the film's dialectical thrust in the combination of two photographic traditions seemingly at odds: the portrait and the landscape.

Like Read, Scott's history lesson commences in the present; the women's lives can never be apprehended in their totality and truth. This is why so much in the film is left unexplained, Constance's deep depression, the death of Beth's son, Alice's broken marriage, the social repercussions that Catherine, as a lesbian, must have been made to suffer. The portrait photographs, like the landscapes, are mute embodiments of history and time. While they bring us closer to the characters of the film, they also emphasize our separation and distance from them in a way that is often overwhelming. The women will remain strangers to us.

The Burning Times and The Company of Strangers play at a kind of nostalgia that might be construed as conservative. While Read's film has been accused of essentialism because it links women with nature and the supernatural, its overall objectives seems incomparable with such an assessment. Clearly, Read seeks to furnish the historical oppression of women with a materialism that moves beyond abstract ideologies. In this sense, the history that her film uncovers is not meant to provide a 'new age' alternative for women, but is rather, a politically vital part of understanding patriarchy.

Similarly, Scott's work might been seen to link women with the pastoral ideals of a Canadian past, and the community of women with the land of fiction (Canada) in a kind of utopian fantasy always beyond reach. I would point out that the clichéd setting of the farmhouse, like the narrative premise itself, discloses a deep sense of irony: if the women in this film are strangers in a strange land, prisoners temporarily of the narrative, it is because a history authored by patriarchy has forgotten them and will always leave behind them. The place in which they come to rest, in which power relations and men are absent, is a strange and unknown one. So in this sense, the film has no choice but to be utopian. Ultimately though, it is much more interested in its spectators (this is why it is so popular). Its very framing, like that of a photograph, and its spectacular landscapes invite and foreground the spectator's gaze in the act of making history. There is a certain complicity that must take place between the characters who play themselves in the narrative and the audience never quite certain just how much is fiction and how much is real. The spectators must be willing to forego this certainty in order to experience not history made strange but history made by strangers.

Bethune THE MAKING OF A HERO

by Kass Banning

Years before its Toronto debut screening this fall at the Festival of Festivals Bethune: The Making of a Hero had received enough publicity to make most producers envious. The attention, however, was not all positive, part celebratory, but mostly gossip, spinning tales of controversies. The hullabaloo that preceded its release marked Bethune as the most anticipated, most expensive (\$18 million, including \$8.5 million from Telefilm) and most complicated (co-produced internationally with China and France and shot on three continents), in Canada's history. The ambitious epic film was long awaited-from various sectors-for a multiplicity of reasons. In spite of the interim battles and apprehension, its release has brought a sense of relief that the film was not, in the end, embarrassing. Although flawed, Bethune's belabored history is largely not in evidence on the screen.

Dr. Norman Bethune, of course, holds a special place in Canada's historical memory, that rare personage that acquired a larger-than-life status: a Canadian hero, an oxymoron perhaps. The Bethune mythology is now every Canadian school child's cant and every Chinese child's litany. We know his contributions to humanity-his surgical technique, his advocacy of socialized medicine, his introduction of blood transfusions on the front lines of the Spanish civil war and his advancement of mobile "guerilla medicine" during the Chinese revolution-exemplified the commonplace belief that Canadians abroad embody virtue and fulfill a mediating role, (a myth that has been shattered for many by our active military presence in the Middle East). Dr. Norman Bethune, the man who died as a martyr to the Chinese Revolution, saving countless lives, was an idealized expatriate Canadian. Yet the darker side of Bethune's reputation, as a womanizer, a big drinker and an arrogant show-off did not minimize his lionization, in spite of his contradictions (or perhaps because of them) part reprobate, part saviour, Bethune's iconoclastic image has survived and remains an essential part of the Canadian psyche.

For writer Ted Allen and actor Donald Sutherland Norman Bethune was more than essential-Norman Bethune was an obsession. The shared life's ambition to bring Bethune's legendary life to the big screen helped realize the dream, but it also added fuel to the multi-aspected controversy the production endured. Allen, staking his claim early in the 1940s, wrote an early draft of a script on Bethune's life (and a biography, The Scalpel, the Sword, 1952), securing the movie rights. Allen's commitment was fired by his early contact with Bethune, who had served as mentor for the young



Bethune: The Making of a Hero

journalist. Sutherland was just as passionate about Bethune; he played Bethune in two CBC productions over the last two decades and has also worked on a script and made attempts at development for years. For Sutherland, portraying Bethune was his life's role. But this round, Allen owned the rights. It was his script and he (with the help of his daughter Julie Allen) had brought the production out of the development stage. (He had also written into his contract that all changes to the script had to be ok'd by him.) The two men needed one another, they were both instrumental to the projects' realization, (one owned the script, the other the character) but their individual interpretations, their visions of Bethune, collided from the project's inception. Allen, for example, believed Bethune had been transformed in China, whereas Sutherland saw the good from the beginning. Allen wrote that Bethune should arrive drunk and dishevelled in China, Sutherland played him sober and clean cut.

The eventual schism left Allen and the production on one side and Sutherland and the director on the other. The clash of egos and visions was just one of the many problems that besieged the project. Bob Mckeown's 1988 documentary film Strangers in a Strange Land: The Adventures of a Canadian Film Crew in China did not dispel rumours of the productions' problems, but brutally exposed them. The film unveils the China shoot as a comedy of errors, hardly resembling a cultural exchange. We witness a series of daily frustrations: first world exasperation with less technologically advanced society, conflicts over historical interpretation, delays with daily script changes, a crew on the brink of mutiny over working

conditions, overbudgeting and more delays. Philip Borsos's embarrassing temper tantrum on camera did not inspire confidence in this abilities to sustain the production.

Yet Borsos is an accomplished director. The Grey Fox, for example, is an unsung gem, where a historical personage this time is writ large against the western Canadian landscape. Yet Bethune's producers blamed the film's first-cut flaws on its rigid chronological order. It didn't live up to their preconceptions of a Lawrence of Arabia design. Borsos was cut out of the final editing process, and a voice-over narration was introduced to cement the newly conceived series of flash-backs together.

Ironically, the last-minute editing room changes to chronology to boost the film's appeal contributed to Bethune's greatest flaw-its unsuccessful structure and overreliance on narration. The viewer is constantly jettisoned between China and Montreal with a few stops in Spain and a New York sanatorium sandwiched in between. The cuts themselves are not necessarily bothersome, but the accompanying inane titles bog the narrative flow. The barrage of place names and dates-Montreal 1925, 15 years earlier, or up state New York, 1927, Yenan, 1938, Madrid 1936-to name but a few, signals/presumes that the viewer is rather thick. These devices needn't be so laboured and clumsily executed as they are in Bethune. The artful flashback (executed at a dizzying speed, compared to Bethune) is the successful trademark of British director Nicholas Roeg, for example, and the recent Russia House switches locales constantly, folding back on itself with elegant ease.



The flashbacks are funnelled through the Chester Hines character-a stand-in for writer Allen-

whose function (structurally) is to provide narrative cement, he offers himself as a researcher of Bethune's life at the film's opening. In the perpetual present, Hines "interviews" the "players"-Bethune's wife, friends and colleagues-in this version of the doctor's life. The interviews are conducted in a library shot in warm brown tones with a hushed (but dramatic) urgency. The journalist device, executed to extract information, add authenticity and generally fill in the blanks for the viewer, becomes rather tiresome. The sincere informationseeking over-the-shoulder close-ups of Hines' subjects are formulaic. Their individual reminiscences, however, spark off further detours, and narrative sequences are thus motivated by their stories. To mention just one example of the heavy handedness of the device, a voice over says "he wanted his wife to conform to his vision of the way it was" and we cut to a sequence with Bethune and Frances on a suspended bridge. Bethune entices the frightened Frances to cross, bellowing "Frances if you can't find the courage to do this, where in God's name will you find the courage to go forward into our future together" and we again cut to an interview with Frances and Hines. What is coded as the narrative sequence is indeed just that, an illustration. Bethune acts out what the interviewees describe. This tell and show aspect-confession transformed to narrative-interrupts the epic drama, often cancelling it out.

Obviously, the desired effect was to illustrate Hines' "deep ambiguity" about Bethune-and to show the many sides of the man. After all, it is Allen's story. And herein lies another problem, the Hines character does not sustain interest. As a foil, he fails; feelings of hero worship and disappointment do not sustain the narrative; that task is left to Sutherland. The fragmentary exposition doesn't offer ambiguity, only redundancy and confusion.

In spite of the constant toing and froing, Bethune moves in two ascending spiral-like movements, his coming to accept communism, and his eventual internalization of its major humanistic tenets, which leads him to redemption. This movement is of Shakespearean proportions. Bethune's extraordinary gifts are made manifest, but his hubris is painfully evident. Despite his brilliance and commitment to the right side, the man was difficult and often a boor. He loses his temper, demonstrates insensitivity to his wife and others and demands perfection. Arriving in China, Mrs. Dowd the missionary (a weak potential love interest played by Helen Shaver) entreats Bethune "to learn patience." With characteristic self-importance he replies "I won't rest till fascism is wiped off the face of the earth."

Nearly two hours later during a self-confession session Bethune apologized to comrade Fung (an unskilled doctor who he had cruelly belittled), claiming "I didn't recognize the fascism within myself, that lies within each of us." Between these two moments of arrogance and self-discovery a series of slight details indicate the transformation. Bethune arrives carrying the accoutrements of western civilization-a phonograph and Beethoven collection in hand-and is dwarfed against the grandeur of the landscape. In spite of his diminu-

tive status in the viewer's eye, he makes demands along his march to Mao. Only during his meeting with Mao does he appear smaller and somewhat humbled (read normal). (Interestingly, the two men are shot as equals, with Mao not especially privileged). Hints of his growing respect for the Chinese people are evident when he intrudes upon an old man practising Tai Chi, and then gracefully backs away.

Bethune's journal entries further indicate his emerging reverence for the Chinese people. Like many devices in the film, this one is overdone too. The preponderance of shots of Bethune sitting in front of his typewriter, with swelling sounds of Beethoven, tip the gesture into cliché. Just when we feel the utmost pity for a dying Bethune, the typewriter is invoked. As he slowly types the words "I'm fatally ill, I'm going to die" we pull back at the enormity of the cliché.

The women characters in Bethune also suffer from a hackneyed treatment. They are also, for the most part, largely superfluous. For all Bethune's alleged womanizing there is not evidence of eroticism here, apart from a few botched kisses and a direct quotation from James Joyce. Helen Shaver is wasted, as is Anouk Aimee. Her character's sexual relationship to Bethune is left ambiguous; she is his guide to correct politics. They begin their relationship when he spots her on a bench and proclaims "my name is Norman Bethune and I'm overwhelmed by your beauty." With this kind of writing one suspects that Anouk Aimee was an afterthought, brought in to fulfill co-production requirements.

It is unfortunate that the film took so long to make, for Sutherland's age detracts from the power of the film-again contributing to its triteness. He just isn't convincing as a radical young man. He looks foolish doing a poor imitation of Fred Astaire or intoning Blake ("death is irresistible") while painting the sanatorium walls, though his bursts of ego could be forgiven in a younger looking man. By the time he finally realizes the limitation of his ego, he has nearly lost the audi-

Still, the end of the film belongs to Sutherland and the landscape of China. The scenes set in China were the most successful, achieving an epic grandeur at times. In this setting, the legend came alive and Bethune's Chinese name, Bai Chu En (White Seeking Grace) seemed apposite; he was truly a national hero. There are nice touches throughout however. The scene where Bethune stands on a stage in Montreal, with newsreels of the Spanish civil war behind him, and the audience bursts into The Internationale is particularly memorable because it takes a risk. But one can't help thinking that the film would have benefitted from focusing on the later period of Bethune's life, instead of trying to be faithful to all its salient details.

Unfortunately the material itself-Bethune the man, the legend—overawed the project's many players. The desire for a faithful depiction of a life, instead of crafting narrative, lead to the overreliance on shop-worn devices and clichés. Bethune's tortured rite of passage attests to the fact that there were too many players, too many interests at stake to guide its successful realization. Bethune stands as a wonderful document of a great man, but it is not an outstanding film.

My Husband is Trying to Kill Me...

REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

by Florence Jacobowitz and Richard Lippe

Reversal of Fortune is one of the films now surfacing which addresses the issue of the woman's abuse within marriage other recent examples include Not Without My Daughter and Sleeping with the Enemy. While these films stem from a more vocal awareness of issues of violence against women, the films can also be perceived as being firmly rooted in a long tradition of women's fiction and the woman's film. The gothic melodrama, which one can link to women's novels such as Jane Eyre, Daniel Deronda and others, pointedly dramatizes the woman's experience of fear and the threat of violence centred within the 'terrible' house, her home. More precisely, the marital bedroom becomes the site of the alleged crime. The tradition of the 'paranoid' wife was a source of inspiration for a series of significant forties melodramas, e.g. Rebecca, Suspicion, Gaslight, Undercurrent, The Secret Beyond the Door, to name but a few. Illness is often a metaphor for the violence/abuse inflicted on the woman. Reversal of Fortune, framed ostensibly as a drama about the pursuit of justice within the American legal system, is also, upon closer scrutiny, a melodrama about the disintegration of the couple, structured by the same basic suspicion: is the husband trying to kill his wife and what has caused the wife's fatal illness? Clearly these dramas continue to be popular because they refer to experiences which remain relevant to contemporary gender relations.

As with many of its distinguished forties predecessors, the pursuit of 'truth' and questions of guilt structures the narrative. Reversal of Fortune, based on the novel by Harvard professor and legal practitioner, Alan Dershowitz/Ron Silver, who appears as a leading protagonist in the film, foregrounds its concerns with issues of legality and justice. In addition, the 'couple,' Claus von Bulow/Jeremy Irons and Sunny von Bulow/Glen Close, are familiar to the audience from the wellpublicized trials that received extensive media coverage. This all lends a gloss of hyper-realism to the genre and fictional conventions that shape the story. On the one hand, given that this is Dershowitz's story, his perceptions of the events colour the narrative's attempts at giving Sunny a voice that counters Claus' testimony. Although Sunny is given a tentative, ironic/commentative voice, this voice is also clouded by her depression and her responses to that depression through drugs, alcohol and sleep. Her self-destructive tendencies may implicate her complicity in her death though, more generally, they suggest a way of coping with an unhappy marriage. And, ultimately, it is Claus whom Dershowitz defended. Therefore, the framework of the legal investigation and all its specifications is displaced by the overriding antagonism underlying contemporary gender relationships.

The film takes great pains to construct strong connotations of difference between Dershowitz's middle-class Jewish liberal democratic milieu and von Bulow's decadent 'upper class' Wasp insular society. The film exploits the oppositions between the two men on several levels ranging from physical differences, performance styles, to the mise-en-scène of their homes, eating habits, etc. Much of the film's humour is derived from the clash of opposites. There is a tradition in the Hollywood cinema of glamourizing the rich and revelling in their failures and miseries. Despite this meticulous play on distinguishing the protagonists from one another, the film, on a more profound level, suggests a deeply rooted affinity between them. Both men are aware of their power and privilege in their varying domains, and both express a hostility towards the women with whom they're involved. Despite Dershowitz's claims that von Bulow is strange and is difficult to fathom, he is, at the same time, fascinated with the mysterious European Other, who seems antithetical in every way. Dershowitz seems far more drawn to von Bulow's case than to the two underprivileged black youths awaiting their death. His motives for taking on the case seem more complex than his rationalization concerning the ability of the rich to construct their own investigation and gather evidence. Dershowitz's gamble in defending von Bulow sets up very high stakes: if he loses, he loses his reputation and his winning means reversing a decision and taking on the state of Rhode Island but it also offers him the kind of money, publicity and celebrity status that surround a rich privileged couple like the von Bulows. Both men recognize their mutual willingness to exploit one another as is evident in the scene in the yacht club. Von Bulow is willing to risk everything to gain his freedom while Dershowitz is likewise willing to exploit von Bulow to win his reversal. Neither man can afford or wish to

The metaphor of the basketball game is very appropriate to the narrative on a variety of levels. Outside of the obvious connotations of succeeding through team cooperation lies a more fundamental dramatization of the intimate connections between masculinity, the law, power and sport. This interdependence is central to masculine dominant society. The lawyer takes on an adversarial role, and acts as a combatant in the ring/forum/arena of the courtroom. Von Bulow sponsors Dershowitz to 'play' for him and Dershowitz chooses von Bulow as his patron; von Bulow supplies him with the context, the challenge and the reward. Aside from emblemizing 'democratic' America, the sport specifically represents a system of power which is bought into via profession, class and, not least, gender. Dershowitz, being white, male and a successful lawyer secures the same table at Delmonaco's that von Bulow secured via Sunny's fortune. Claus brings his 'class,' title and credentials to the marriage: Sunny supplies the inherited money which, without the framework of the marriage, brings her no legitimate outlet for enjoying the power her wealth offers. Sunny seems well aware of the rules

she and Claus have agreed to play by and of his infringement of these through his desire to work and

procure a mistress within their social circles. Von Bulow's interests are to pursue his masculinist needs - the job, his mistress - without losing the empowerment of Sunny's funds. Significantly, Dershowitz never seems to grasp this; he attributes Sunny's demise and death-wish to her loss of identity as a wife and mother - a rationale which suits his ideological understanding of gender roles. Sarah/Annabella Sciorrax (Dershowitz's student, colleague and ex-lover) more astutely understands that von Bulow gains everything by killing his wife: he rids himself of Sunny without cutting himself off from her life-giving money. The film's varying endings reflect the basic conflicts of interest underlying gender difference. Dershowitz articulates his understanding of von Bulow's motives when, following an argument with Sarah, he tellingly remarks that the jury will be sympathetic because the husband's desire to kill his wife is a fantasy that everyone shares. The misogyny underlying the comment is shared by both men and is essential to masculine dominance and the desire to 'win' at all cost. Claus hates the power Sunny wields, repeating at various times that Sunny always gets what she wants and no one crosses Sunny; similarly Dershowitz can't accept Sarah's intelligence when she wins an argument and refuses to capitulate to his authority.

These parallels are implicit throughout the film. The woman who challenges Dershowitz for taking on the case at the start is a red herring; she can be contradicted and humiliated without effort. Sarah is far more threatening as they have shared an emotional involvement as well as a professional one, and Sarah's challenge is more formidable. In fact both men are threatened by strong women and both fear emasculation and fallibility, which is classic to the melodrama: the



Reversal of Fortune



secret the terrible/gothic house harbours is the fear of the male's castration.

Generically and culturally, the house, the familial bourgeois domain, is kept safely separate and private. The house is the place where women are cut off from the social world and where familial secrets fester. This is intensified in relation to class: the von Bulow home is filmed from an aerial point of view in the opening credits to underscore its compound-like and institutional characteristics. Sunny's narration, beginning from the track into the open door in the private hospital, connects her house to her new home, again a private guarded place. The desire to keep the outside world at a distance is a central concern to the von Bulow's social milieu. This fuels a great part of the cultural fascination with peering into this setting. There is, at the same time, a great deal of ambivalence; one wants to be privy to the lifestyle of the 'rich and famous' and simultaneously watch them suffer for their privilege. As Sunny says, "Everyone enjoys a circus." The fantasy of excess and decadence is enhanced by the narrative ingredients of drugs, illicit sex, the buying of a titled husband; however, the basic premise that the film explores and uncovers - the secret behind the door - is fundamental to the fabric of society extending beyond the bounds of a single class. Whether Claus is responsible for Sunny's comatose condition is ultimately not important; the film suggests that social determinants conspire to kill Sunny, based on a variety of factors - the crime is presented as a cyclical event. Sunny has been 'dying' over a long period. As in the tradition of the genre she is trapped by her marriage, her sequestration within a private world which offers no options and nowhere to go.

Again, the question of von Bulow's guilt and the success of Dershowitz's reversal of fortune are relevant to the plot, but are essentially secondary to the film's more primary exploration of gender relations. The film compares intriguingly to Preminger's Anatomy of a Murder which also uses a courtroom drama in a sophisticated manner to investigate gender tensions which ultimately take precedence in the narrative. Even Sunny's enigmatic presence, which foregrounds the whole question of truth and the typically omniscient invisible narrative voice of Realist cinema, is yet another displacement of the narrative's concerns. The von Bulows are stylized characterizations which become emblematic of the film's theme, "My husband is trying to kill me...." This is in line with the generic traditions from which the film springs. The characters point to a larger frame of reference. Jeremy Irons' stylized, playfully ghoulish performance (for which he has earned an Oscar nomination), consciously exploits the fact that he represents something beyond the individual accused of an aberrant crime. While von Bulow is flagrantly "un-American" in his deportment, attitude and arrogance, the film never rejects him as the unknowable Other in order to rationalize the crime, nor is he caricatured. In fact, von Bulow is integrated into the domestic and social arena through his relations with his step-children, his American mistress, and most significantly, his very 'democratic' attorney, Mr. Dershowitz. Even his relationship with Sunny is shaded; it is characterized by comments which may or may not express their concern for one another. This is, at times, presented with a touch of dry

humour; Claus attests to Sunny's generosity, "Sunny loved Christmas," as she staggers about the festive décor, while Sunny, at another point in the narrative, recalls Claus' tenderness.

The question of identification in this film is complex and is left purposely ambiguous. No central protagonist is offered as a figure of empathy or identification. Nicholas Kazan's screenplay, also nominated for an Academy Award, deserves mention in the way it avoids flattening out the issues and evidences an awareness of the deep roots underlying the von Bulow's case. One can more fully appreciate the film's achievement through a comparison with Brian de Palma's recent fiasco, Bonfire of the Vanities, which presents a crude and heavy-handed approach to the privileged, wealthy classes. The film indulges what it apparently sets out to critique and ridicule. It is a one-dimensional portrait of the monied class which fails to integrate its protagonists into a larger social domain; the attitude is smug and condescending.

Reversal of Fortune is not lacking in sardonic humour but doesn't sacrifice intelligence along the way. The ending is a case in point. Von Bulow enters a drugstore to buy a pack of cigarettes; he becomes aware of the fact that the woman behind the counter recognizes him from his photograph on the front page of the newspaper. Von Bulow takes advantage of his newly-acquired notorious celebrity status and hastily adds that he'll take a vial of insulin as well, watching the horror register on the woman's face. The moment touches upon the fact that von Bulow is no longer anonymous in his sheltered world, but he remains empowered. Ultimately, the film articulates an awareness of who is socially empowered and who isn't, though it fails to take an obvious political position. It is not without significance that Dershowitz is now in the process of defending the 'Reverend' Jimmy Bakker, another male white rich empowered man.

Reversal of Fortune has been nominated for three Academy Awards, including best director for Barbet Schroeder², but it has not done well at the box-office. In a year in which the movie-going public favoured more reassuring and less demanding films like Ghost, Home Alone, and Pretty Woman, Reversal of Fortune refuses to iron out its problematic, and assuage the audience, nor does it minimize its power to disturb by offering a conventional ending. Sunny's protest remains buried within her coma, Dershowitz has valiantly fought for and secured Claus' freedom and leaves with his interests intact, but the impetus behind the crime remains unresolved. The melodrama investigating the husband's guilt in attempting to rid himself of his wife, a familiar theme, is recast in contemporary terms without any compromises. There is no alternative lover in whom to find shelter, and the fears of the 'paranoid' wife are not unfounded - they are as real as her comatose condition, entrenched in the foundations of the American marital home.

The contradictory, grotesque treatment of the black community in the film is a topic beyond the scope of this discussion.

Schroeder's appearance as the rich patriarch Olivier involved in a cyclical familial crime in Rivette's Celine and Julie go Boating is worth noting in relation to this film.



Weininger's Nacht

Weininger's Nacht

(WEININGER'S LAST NIGHT)

by Susan Morrison

One of the difficulties of deciding which films to see at the Festival of Festivals is that often choices are made on the basis of very little information. This is a situation which frequently results in disappointment, especially if the selection was based on some small interest or mere whim. Flipping through the Festival of Festivals catalogue, I happened to notice that one of the films in the series titled 'The Edge' took as its central focus Otto Weininger, a minor Viennese writer with some connection to Freud. I circled it and went to the screening.

What I discovered, or perhaps I should say was confronted by, was a film of immense power, the kind that overwhelms the viewer who is unprepared for the scope, depth and painfulness of the material involved. I have seen very few films that left me breathless and speechless when the screen went black, but Weiningers Nacht definitely falls into that category. My immediate instinct was to see the film again—most Festival films are screened twice—as I find it difficult to talk about a film after one viewing, especially this kind of film. However, the next and only other showing was a few days

later at 9 o'clock in the morning. There was no way that I could make such an early screening, nor, in all honesty, would I have wanted to expose myself to such raw emotions and powerful expressions at that time of the day. My attempts to convince several friends to go to the second screening failed, with the result that I now find myself in the position of being the only person I know who has seen Weiningers Nacht, yet wanting everyone I know to experience it as well. I can't imagine the film getting general distribution because it is quite specialised and limited in appeal. One of the pleasures of the Festival of Festivals is being able to see just these kinds of films; on the other hand, it is frustrating to realize that a desired 'second viewing' will probably never occur.

Weiningers Nacht, an Austrian film directed by the Viennese actor/director Paulus Manker, is based on a stage play by Joshua Sobol called *The Soul of a Jew*. Set in Vienna, during the night of October 3, 1903, it chronicles the last hours of Otto Weininger, a 23 year old who has symbolically chosen to commit suicide in the same Viennese house where Beethoven had died.

The film opens with Weininger renting a room in Schwarzspanier-strasse 15 in preparation for his eventual self-inflicted death at dawn. As the night unfolds, he is confronted with representations of people and events in his life which carry on a continuous and active debate with him about the meaning of his life and his decision to end it in absolute despair. This is not,let me assure you, an Austrian remake of "Its a Wonderful Life". As the audience has prior historical knowledge of Weininger's imminent death, the debate serves to open up issues of causation in order to enable a potentially hostile audience (he was not a nice man) to perceive the end result as tragic rather than fitting.

(The historical) Weininger was a middle-class Viennese Jew who was rabidly anti-Semitic; on the day that he received

his doctorate he converted to Protestantism. He was a suppressed homosexual (he promoted the celibate life) who loathed women. His studies in philosophy and psychology at the University of Vienna led him towards an investigation of theories of sexuality based on gender difference— an investigation of great interest in fin-de-siecle Vienna among writers and artists. (Most theories centred around the notion of woman as evil seducer and man as innocent victim e.g. Klimt and Klinger in art, Moebius and Krauss in writing). Weininger's contribution was that he developed a theory of bisexuality premised on the idea that 'the original human disposition was bisexual, and that only when the male or female element is in the majority do we find what we call man or woman." He sent his thesis to Freud for support only to have Freud accuse him of plagiarizing from his friend Wilhelm Fliess who had been working on similar notions. Weininger's moment of fame came from the publication of his doctoral dissertation as the book Geschlecht und Charakter (Sex and Character), in which he included three additional chapters to the effect that women and Jews are the 'weak links' in God's chain of creation. While he had his supporters - Strindberg was an especially avid ally who 'thanked Herr Doctor for having finally solved the "women problem" '- Weininger nevertheless could not come to terms with the personal effects of holding such a theory at the expense of his self-identification. The last entry in his diary reads "The hatred of women is nothing more than the hatred of one's own sexuality which one has not yet overcome" an insight which had little power to save him.

Weiningers Nacht is not a conventional, realist narrative. The form that structures the film is that of avant-garde theatre; in fact, the film seems to be a filmed version of the stage play. (Paulus Manker, the lead actor as well as director of the 1989 film, also directed the stage production of Sobol's play at the Deutsches Volkstheater Vienna in 1988.) There has been no attempt to transform the play into a 'seamless and naturalised' film, for the use and foregrounding of theatrical artifice is always present. This is not mere carelessness or conceit, but is extremely effective in the Brechtian way in which it engages the viewer's mind in an internal dialogue with the gripping, often bizarre and sometimes excruciatingly painful events taking place on screen/on stage.

In the film, theatrical artifice is presented and works on a number of levels both internal and external to the text itself. One example of the former category is to be found in the device of having a 'double' for Weininger who is not only onstage at the same time as he is but who is also played by a female actor (Josefin Platt). While she is dressed in man's clothing, there has been no attempt to disguise the fact that she is a woman. The effectiveness of this device, of course, is that it serves to bring into the foreground Weininger's own conflict with his sexual identity.

Another example may be found in one of the most impressive scenes in the film, a scene where Otto and his father are sitting at tables across from each other in what appears to be a very fancy brothel/cabaret. While they dine and converse, two scantily-dressed women crawl under the linen-covered tables and begin to give them blow jobs. What the woman under the father's table is doing is not visible, although it

seems to be going along just fine. However, the woman under Otto's table has a knockwurst in her hand which she fondles, but every so often, as Otto speaks to his father, she bites a chunk out of it, causing him to scream in pain. Needless to say, this is at once a very funny and extremely uncomfortable scene to witness.

There are other examples which work at the external level, i.e. not as scripted but as depicted visually. The sets, and especially Otto's rented chambers, appear to be vastly oversized, a device which literally 'belittles' the actors within. Also, it quickly becomes obvious that there is a small group of actors who play multiple roles, as in a repertory company. The combinations, however are anything but arbitrary. The same actor, Sieghardt Rupp, plays both Otto's father Leopold, a stern and patriarchal figure, and Sigmund Freud, to whom Weininger looked for approval but who gave none. Similarly, the parts of Adelaide, Otto's mother, and Adele, his landlady are played by the same actress, Hilde Sochor. I am certain that the apparent similarity of the names Adelaide and Adele is not mere chance. At the end of the film when Sochor enters the room to find Otto dying on the floor, she cradles his head in her lap and sings a poignant Yiddish lullaby ,Mein Yingele (My Little One). Her specific identity at that moment as mother or landlady is glossed over, with the result that Sochor seems to be portraying both 'mother-types' for Otto at the same time, conflated into the one archetypal female character.

One other point I would like to take up about Weiningers Nacht is that it expresses quite clearly and openly the extreme level of anti-Semitism that was both current and common in Vienna at the turn of the century. While I am for the most part familiar with Freud's concerns and worries regarding anti-Semitism, viz. his lack of advancement in the university, his fear of the potential tendency to stigmatize psychoanalysis as a 'Jewish science', the extent to which it must have informed and affected the lives of all Viennese Jews is underlined in Weiningers Nacht.

It is my belief that a valid work of art should have some transformative affect on the individual confronted by it. The power of *Weiningers Nacht* comes from the way that it exposes as tragic the pressures and circumstances that resulted in Weininger's suicide. As both a female and a Jew, i.e. Weininger's two 'target groups', I was not in any way alienated by the film, but rather, very moved by it.

NOTE

The information concerning Weininger and his writings was taken from a publicity handout from WEGA-Film Vienna. Included in the document was a brief biography of Weininger as well as an article by Nike Wagner 'Sex and Character', and one by Jonny Moser titled 'Anti-Semitism and Zionism in Finde-Siecle Vienna'.

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Documentary

suggests fullness and completion, knowledge and fact, explanations of the social world and its motivating mechanisms. More recently, though, documentary has come to suggest incompleteness and uncertainty, recollection and impression, images of personal worlds and their subjective construction. Documentary has its troubles and solutions to them. They have to do with problems in the representation of people and the worlds they inhabit.

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